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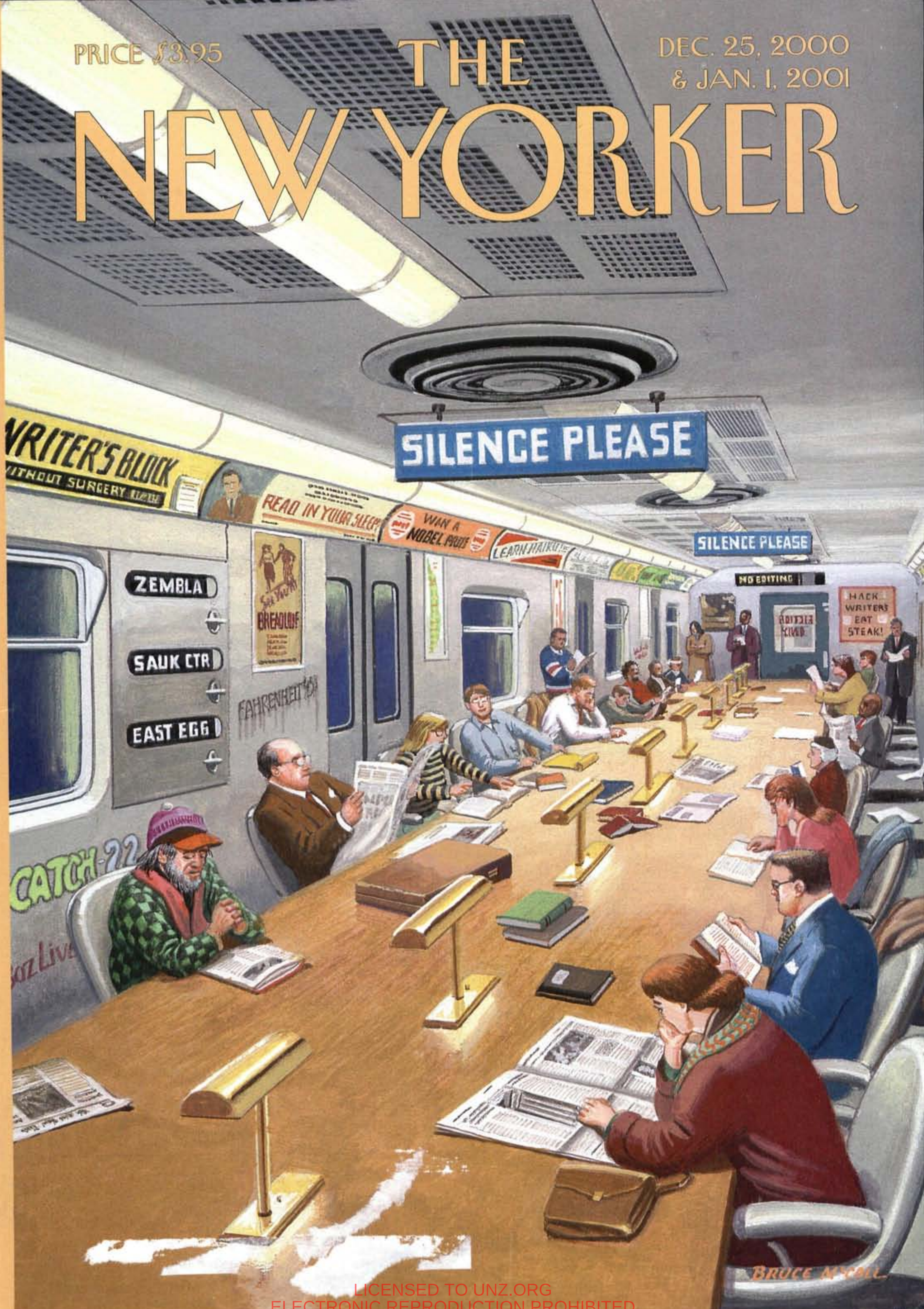
& JAN. 1, 2001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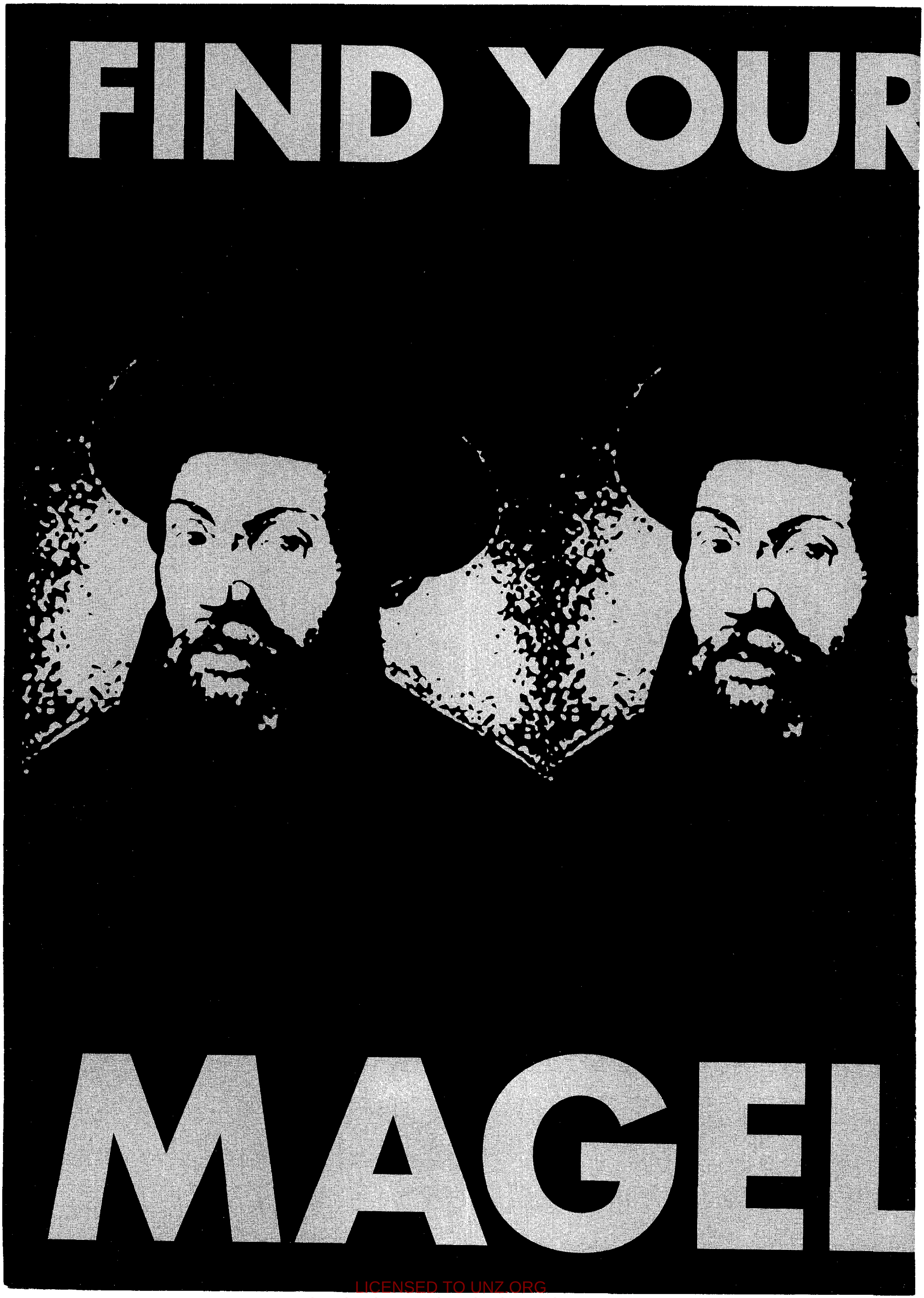
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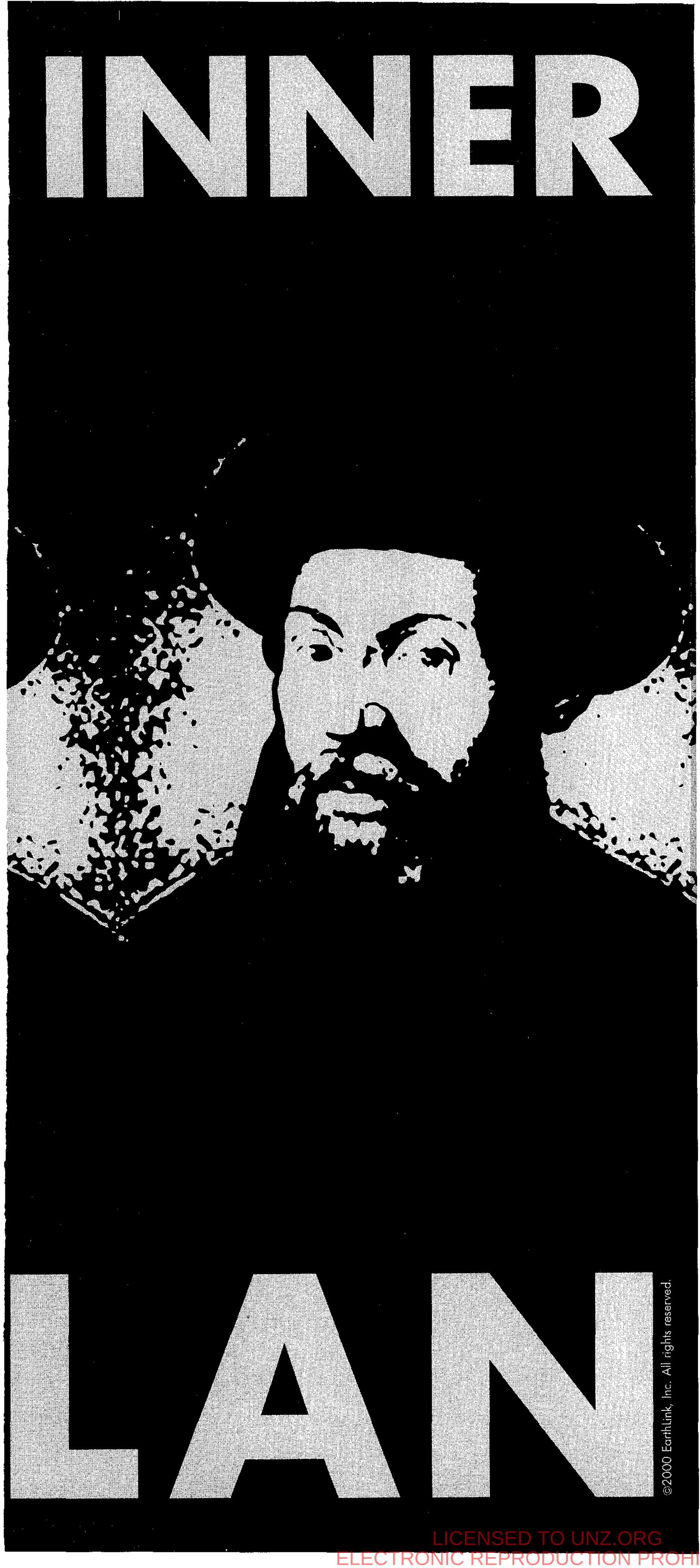

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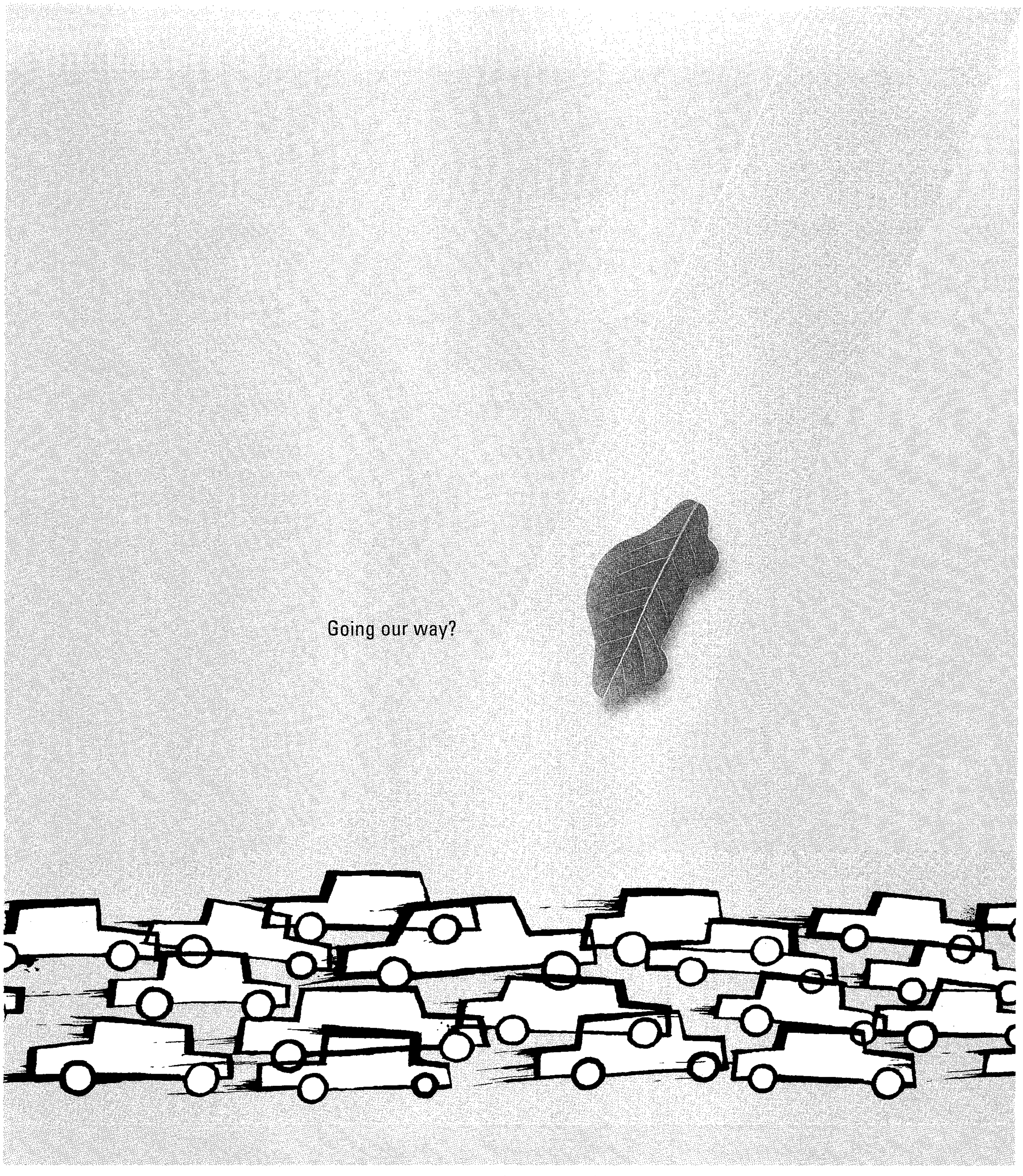
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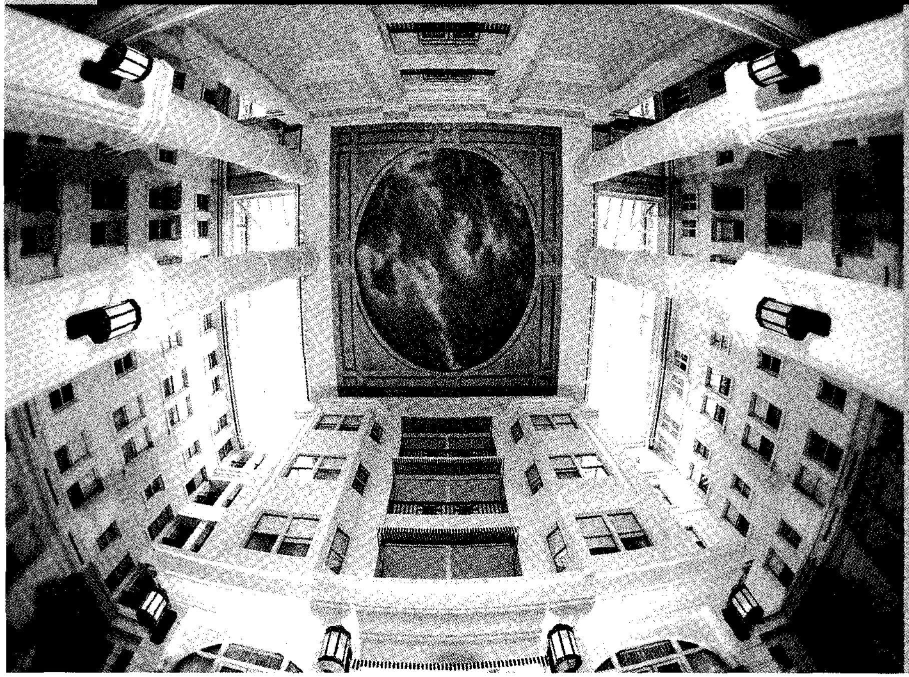

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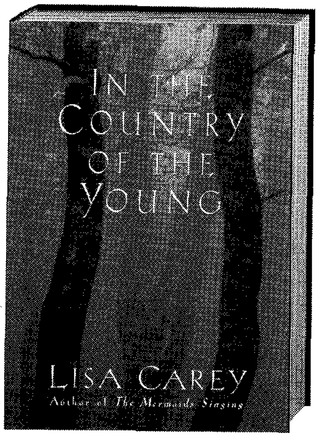

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John le Carré ("The Constant Muse," p. 66) has written eighteen novels, including "The Constant Gardener," which is coming out this month.

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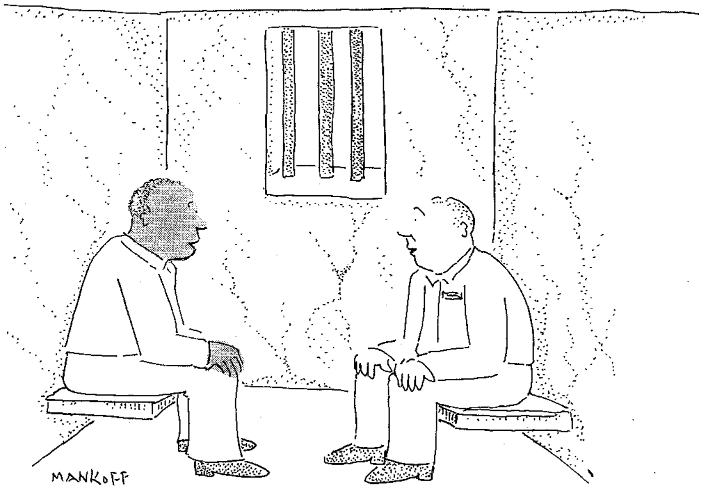
Amy Tan ("Immortal Heart," p. 134) has a new novel, "The Bonesetter's Daughter," which will be published in February.

Annie Proulx ("Big Skies, Empty Places," p. 139) is the author of five works of fiction, including "Close Range," a collection of short stories. ♦



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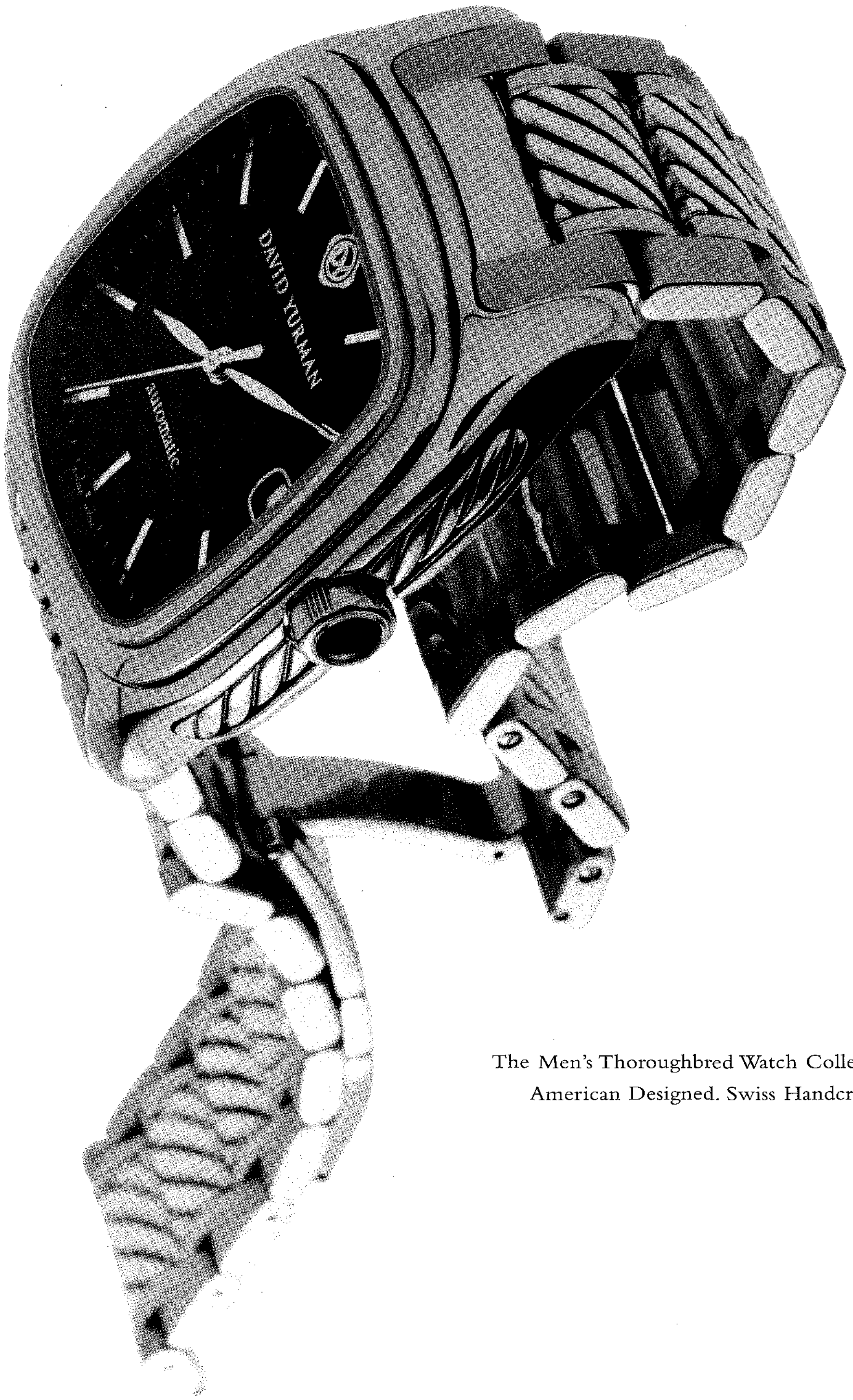

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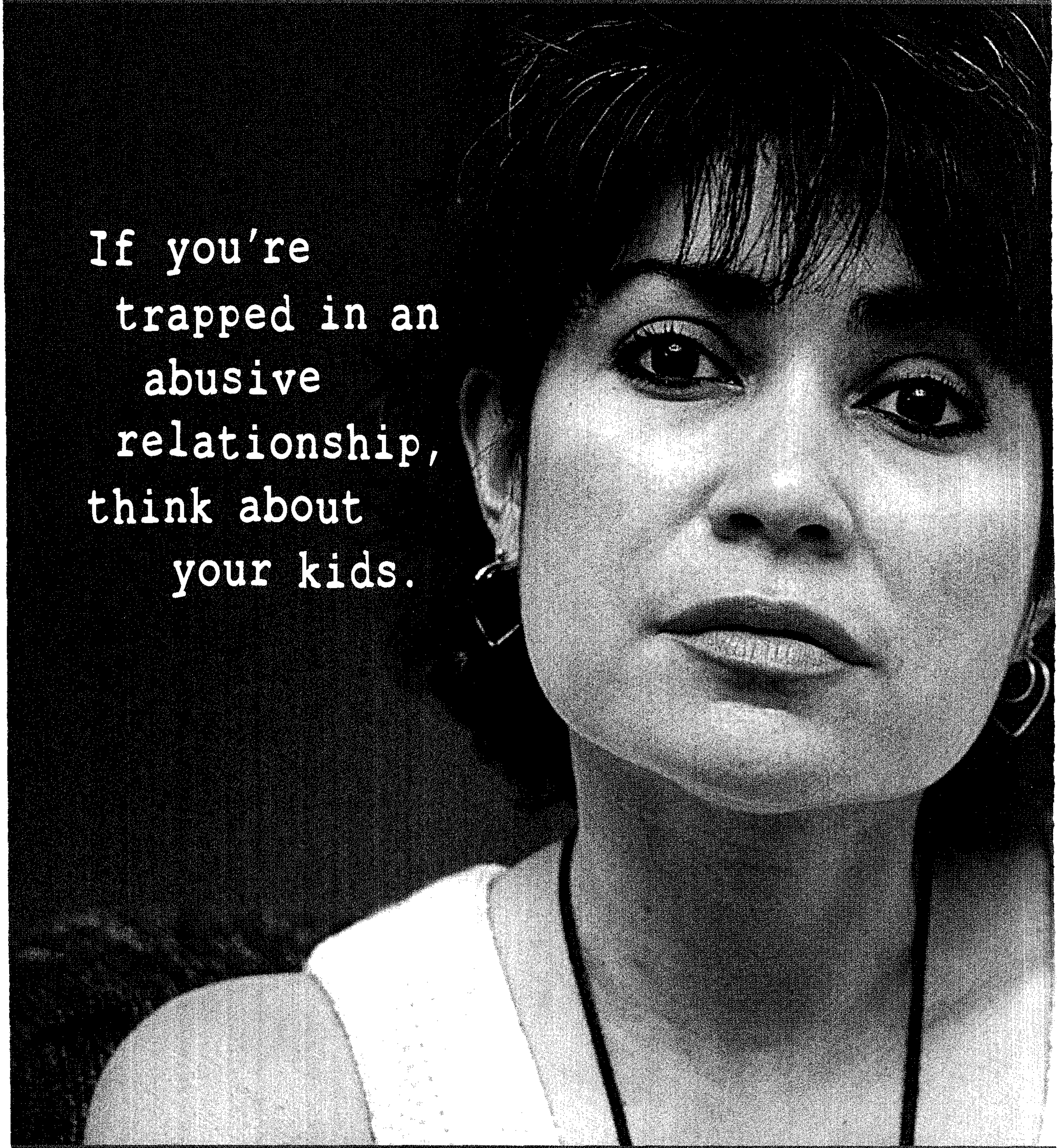
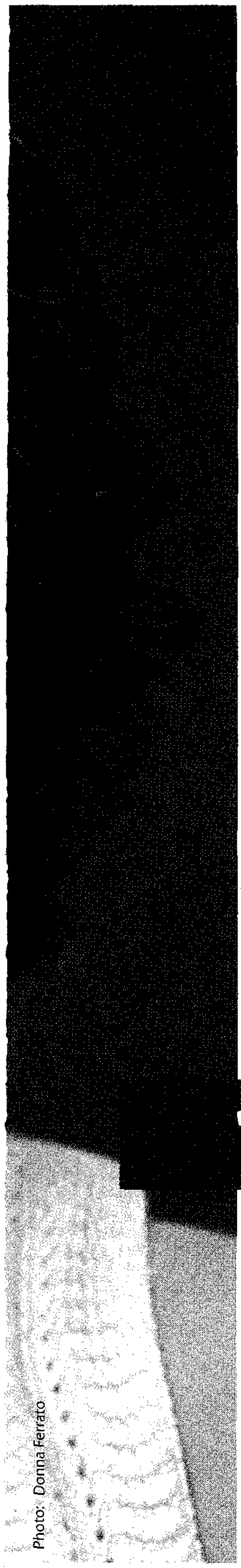

If you're
trapped in an
abusive
relationship,
think about
your kids.

Lupé Evans
Grace Smith House
Dutchess County, NY

HELPING END DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



In counseling others, Lupé knows how difficult it is to escape the cycle of violence. She's been there herself.

Emotionally abused, battered and intimidated, Lupé lived in fear that her partner would kidnap their child if she tried to escape. Everything changed the day she saw signs of violent behavior in her own son. She knew she had to break free. After she found the courage to seek help, she made the decision to help other victims break the cycle of violence—for themselves and their children.

Now, Lupé is a professional advocate for victims of abuse. She knows firsthand that domestic violence is not the problem of "other" people. It affects millions of women, men and children in every community, regardless of race or income. The time to stop the violence is now.

That's why we established *The Philip Morris Campaign Against Domestic Violence.* Our support of organizations that help victims of abuse nationwide is just one of the ways we've been making a difference to communities in need for more than forty years.

That's what I did.

If you or someone you know needs help, contact:

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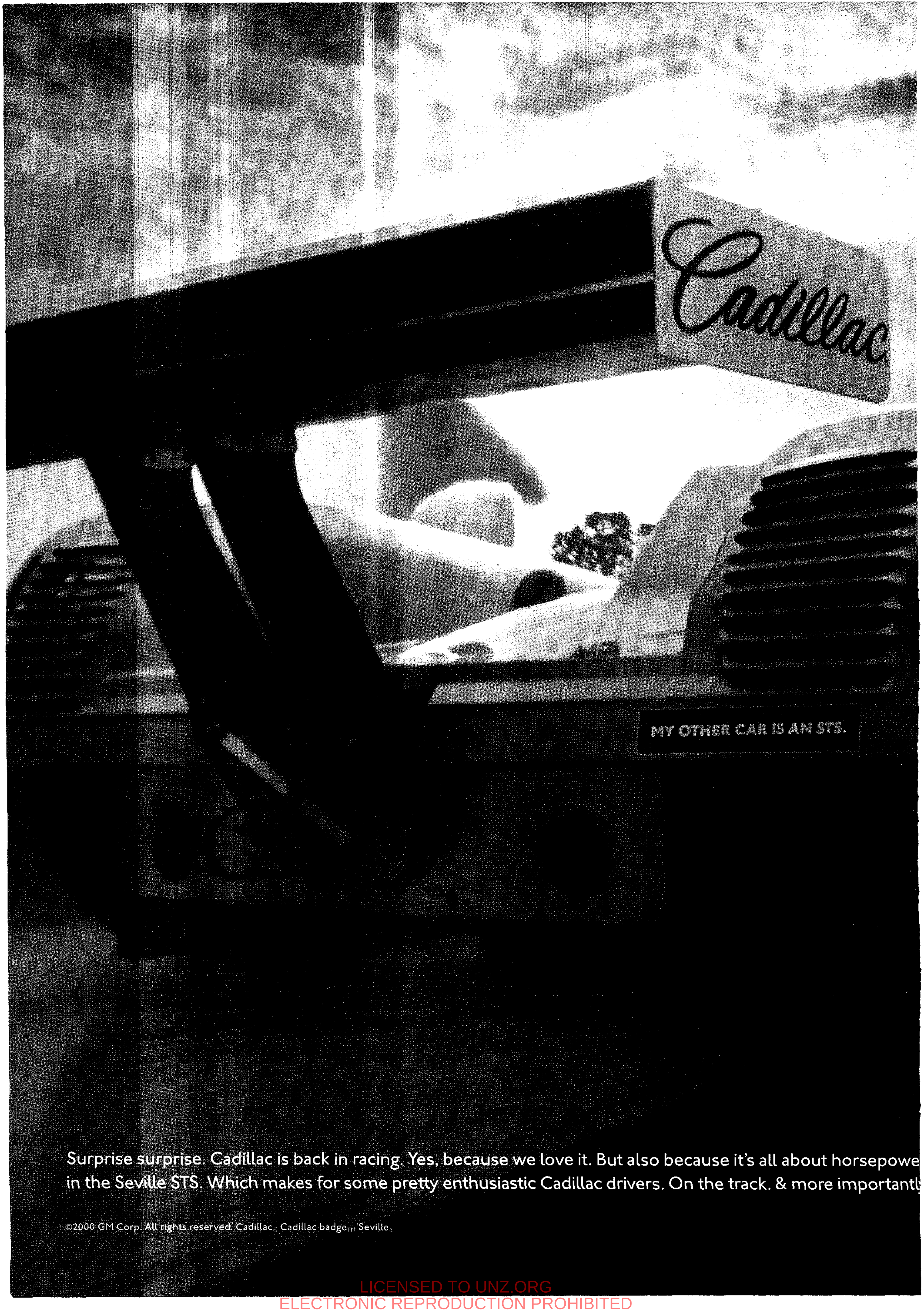

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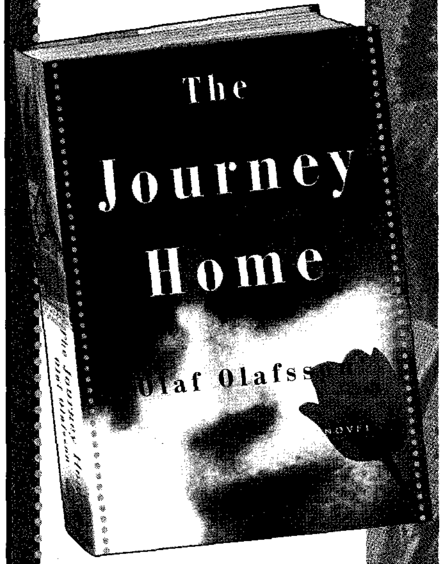

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—*Library Journal*

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THIS SORRY ELECTION

A three-set tennis match goes 6–4, 0–6, 6–4. The winner has won twelve games and the loser has won fourteen. Does the loser have a stronger "moral basis," as Hendrik Hertzberg puts it, in discussing Al Gore's legal challenges, to complain about a questionable call in the last set (The Talk of the Town, December 11th)? Of course not. The loser of the second set may have harbored his strength after he fell behind, just as George W. Bush virtually conceded New York to Gore. Had the rules given victory to whoever got a plurality of the national vote, both candidates would have run different campaigns. The Electoral College may be an imperfect institution, but its existence prevents us from drawing any inference, political or moral, from the national vote in a close election.
William A. Fischel
Professor of Economics, Dartmouth College
Hanover, N.H.

Hertzberg has it right: this election is being stolen in plain view. If George W. Bush had half the integrity he claims, then he would prefer not to take office under a cloud of illegitimacy, and would have embraced a fair recount in Florida. Instead, he is elbowing his way to power by whatever means available and necessary. He has plunged his party back into the depths of Nixonian skulduggery.
Joseph M. Levendusky
Cambridge, Mass.

Neither Bush nor Gore won the election in any unequivocal, objective sense, yet one of these men has to become President. In this larger context, Al Gore had another choice, whether Hertzberg recognizes it or not, besides daring the Bush forces into a mutually destructive game of hardball legal tactics. He could have recognized the ultimate fragility of our democracy, made the decision to act like a leader, and conceded at any of many opportune moments in his more than monthlong fight.
Walter Nicklin
Alexandria, Va.

Hertzberg describes Gore as a "fighter" ready to go for a win. But it wasn't until late in the game, when the Vice-President found himself, because of a mediocre campaign, in the uncomfortable position of playing catchup with Bush, that his strategists reinvented his stolid persona. It was too little, too late. Like a sports team coming from behind, Gore has been forced to rely on a referee's call at the end. As always, if you want something done correctly, do it yourself and get it right the first time.
Hillel Pollock
Jaffrey, N.H.

Gore won Florida, and Bush knows Gore won. Since the early hours of November 8th, I have been waiting for someone to state the actual facts of this sorry election in print. I am grateful to Hertzberg for his obvious political sanity in pointing out just how contemptible the Bush team's machinations have been.
Lynn Mendelsohn
San Diego, Calif.

A popular-vote plurality of some three hundred and fifty thousand out of more than a hundred million cast can hardly be seen as adding legitimacy to Gore's claim to the Presidency. Because of the dilapidated voting machinery used throughout the United States, the margin of error nationwide may, by some estimates, be far greater than Gore's three-tenths-of-one-per-cent margin of victory. Gore's lead in the popular vote is a fluke, just pure dumb luck; it could easily have gone the other way. Bush may have benefitted from luck too, but under our system he won Florida and its electors. If candidates enter an election accepting its rules, they should abide by the outcome, whatever that may be.
Leo van der Harst
Henderson, Nev.

•

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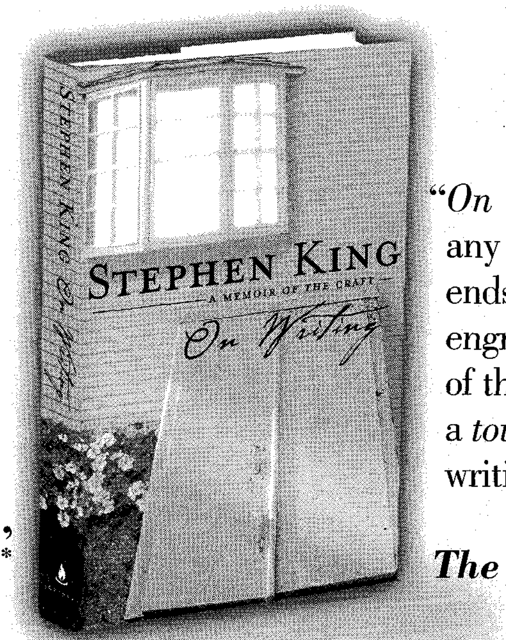
Newsday*



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Rain Taxi

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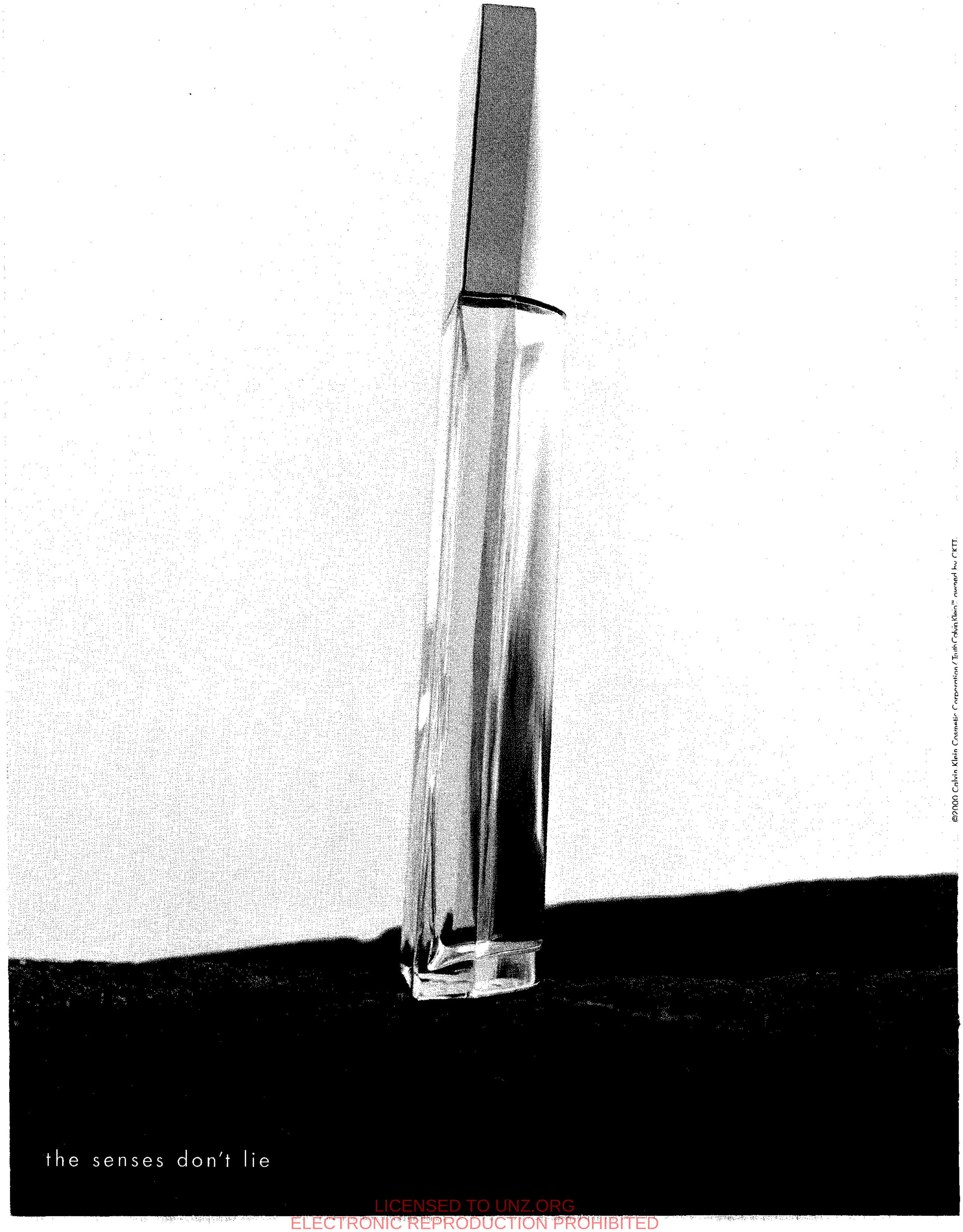
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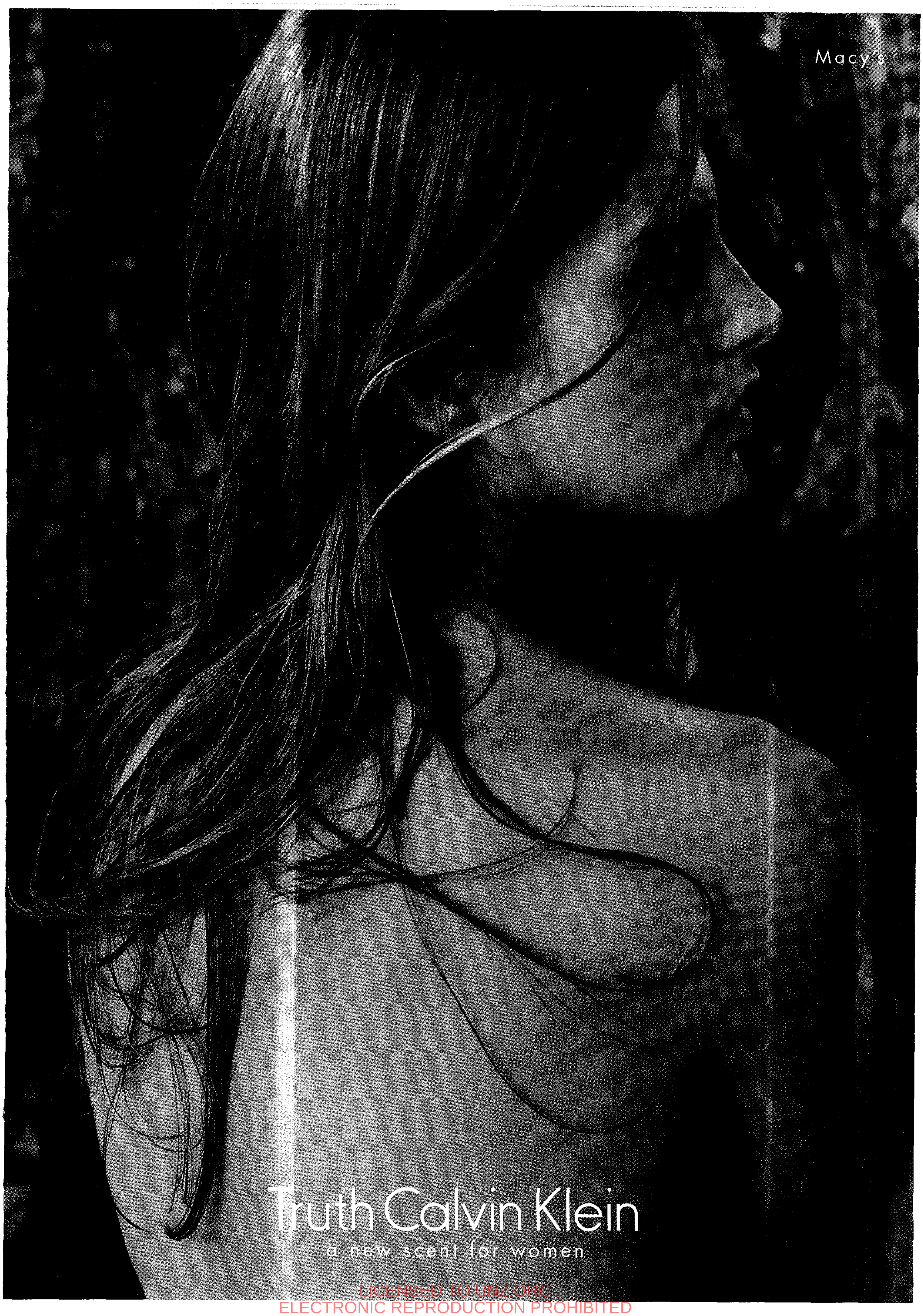
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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

THE THEATRE

OPENINGS & PREVIEWS

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CAT'S PAW
While touring the monuments of New York City, four women lament the effects of men on their lives, in a new play by Mac Wellman. Preview on Dec. 20. Opens Dec. 21 at 7:30. (Soho Rep, 46 Walker St. 479-7979.)

THE WAX
A philosophical sex farce by Kathleen Tolan, in which a group of middle-aged friends reunite for a wedding at a seaside hotel. The cast includes Frank Wood, Laura Esterman, Mary Testa, Lola Pashalinski, and David Greenspan. In previews. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

OPENED RECENTLY

AMERICAN RHAPSODY
KT Sullivan and Mark Nadler star in a musical revue celebrating the works of George Gershwin. (Triad, 158 W. 72nd St. 239-6200.)

BETRAYAL
A revival of Harold Pinter's bleak 1978 comedy of manners, about the blithe treachery of adultery and the thousand little lies that can make and break a friendship. Juliette Binoche, inexplicably, stars as a publisher's wife who has had a long affair with her husband's best friend, a literary agent. Binoche can do happy, she can do sad, but she brings no definition, no specificity, to her role. Liev Schreiber, as her lover, and John Slattery, as her husband, do better with their parts—particularly Slattery, who combines emotional nakedness with reserve to portray the terribly comic aspects of trauma. Draggily directed by David Leveaux. (Reviewed in our issue of 11/27/00.) (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 719-9393.)

THE BITTER TEARS OF PETRA VON KANT
A staged version of the Fassbinder film about a lesbian love affair, adapted by Barbara Saurman and Ian Belton. (Henry Miller Theatre, 124 W. 43rd St. 279-4200.)

CARY AND GALLO: WHAT IF WE DID THIS?
The comedy duo of Josh Cary and Patrick Gallo present live sketch comedy and five short comic films, in which they star. (Soho Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 239-6200.)

A CHILD'S GARDEN
From the Melting Pot Theatre, a musical based on Robert Louis Stevenson's "A Child's Garden of Verses." With music by Louis Rosen, who co-wrote the book with Arthur Perlman and Charlotte Maier. (Theatre 3, at 311 W. 43rd St. 279-4200.)

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	1	2				

COBB
In his brilliantly constructed play about baseball's greatest hitter and most brutal bully, Lee Blessing places three actors (Michael Cullen, Matthew Mabe, and Michael Sabatino) onstage together to portray Tyrus Raymond Cobb; they reminisce from the afterlife and interact with each other at various stages in Cobb's professional and personal career. For Cobb, baseball was a place to stake kingship, but here he's haunted by a forgotten legend, Negro Leaguer and Hall of Famer Oscar Charleston, who forces Cobb to confront the social injustices he sheepishly dodged during his lifetime, denying himself a chance at true greatness. (Lucille Lortel Theatre, 121 Christopher St. 239-6200.)

COMIC POTENTIAL
Or not. Alan Ayckbourn's futuristic farce about an android actress (Janie Dee) who becomes plagued by human feelings for an idealistic young screenwriter might have had the potential to be funny forty years ago, but today it's sub-sitcom pap. Even as a vehicle for the talents of the gravel-voiced British actress Dee, it falls embarrassingly short, despite some amusing moments. It also smacks of misogyny: Dee's programmable "actoid" is the sole woman in the show whose emotional makeup appeals to the men; her only competition is a pair of smart but dismissive lesbians and a desperate, angry, over-the-hill man-eater. Har. (Manhattan Theatre Club, at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212. Closes Dec. 31.)

CRAVE
Deborah Harry stars in the late British playwright Sarah Kane's examination of the dark side of human relationships. (Axis, 1 Sheridan Sq. 807-9300. Closes Dec. 28.)

THE DINNER PARTY
Neil Simon's new comedy is set in an opulent restaurant in Paris, and his six characters—three divorced couples—are not the usual Simon-Americans of his "Suite" plays. They are French, or are meant to be. Still, the play is essentially traditional fare; the running, or limping, gags are in ready supply, and the secondhand shtick, often in the form of aeons-old alimony jokes, flows freely along this Boulevard of Broken Marriages. (11/6/00) (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

DOWN THE GARDEN PATHS
Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson lead the cast in a new four-couple comedy by Anne Meara. (Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane, east of Sixth Ave., between W. 3rd and Bleecker Sts. 307-4100.)

END OF THE WORLD PARTY
A comedy by Chuck Ranberg, about a group of men who rent a Fire Island house together each year. (47th Street Theatre, 304 W. 47th St. 239-6200.)

FERMAT'S LAST TANGO
Pythagoras, Newton, Euclid, and Gauss are characters in a mathematical musical by Joanne Sydney Lessner and Joshua Rosenblum, staged by the York Theatre Company. (Theatre at St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. 239-6200. Closes Dec. 31.)

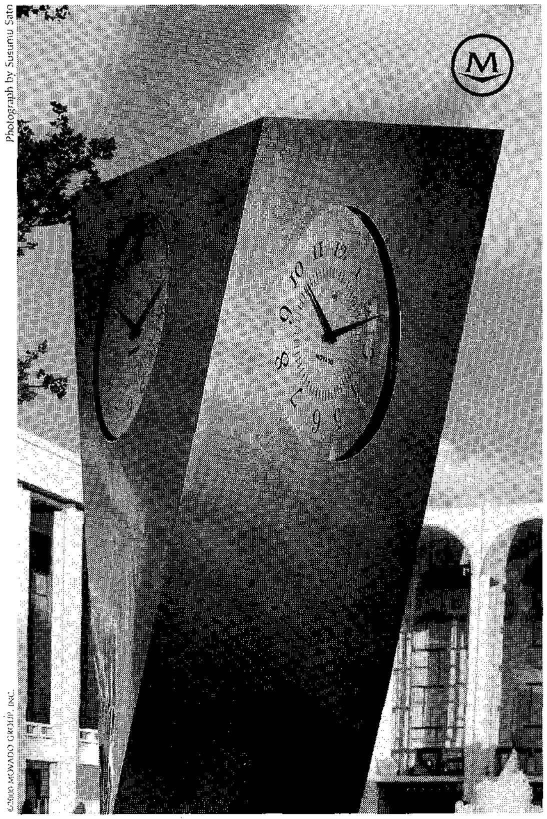
FORBIDDEN BROADWAY 2001: A SPOOF ODYSSEY
The latest edition of Gerard Alessandrini's ongoing musical satire of the players and the plays along the Great White Way. (Stardust, Broadway at 51st St. 239-6200.)

FOUR GUYS NAMED JOSÉ . . . AND UNA MUJER NAMED MARIA
This crowd-pleasing, crayon-colored revue of Latin song and dance is knowingly broad and hammy. But the talented cast sends up the singers and songs that helped create Latin stereotypes and delivers the remaining material—dance songs, songs of nostalgia for one's homeland, songs of love, songs about women named Maria—with exuberant wit and affection. (Blue Angel, 323 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

THE FULL MONTY
The musical version of the 1997 movie, about a group of unemployed factory workers who try to earn some cash by stripping, has all the spirit and charm of the original but, as befits a Broadway production, on a much larger, pizzazzier scale. Early on, Terrence McNally's book and David Yazbek's songs strike notes of class consciousness and unemployment-related low male self-esteem a little too hard, but soon enough the show's winning good humor and inventiveness kick in, and if you don't find yourself laughing consistently (and tearing up occasionally), well, then, maybe you don't *deserve* to see six men prancing around in red G-strings. (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 239-6200.)

GAME SHOW
The action of Bob Walton and Jeffrey Finn's "play" clumsily shifts from a trivia contest between audience volunteers to scripted, behind-the-scenes backstabbing between the producer (Cheryl Stern) and the host (Michael McGrath) of the show within the show. The drama that unfolds during the "commercial breaks" is flat, but the participatory sequences are surprisingly amusing, if only because they involve laughing at the contestants (at a recent show, a professional woman de-

LAURENT CILLUFFO



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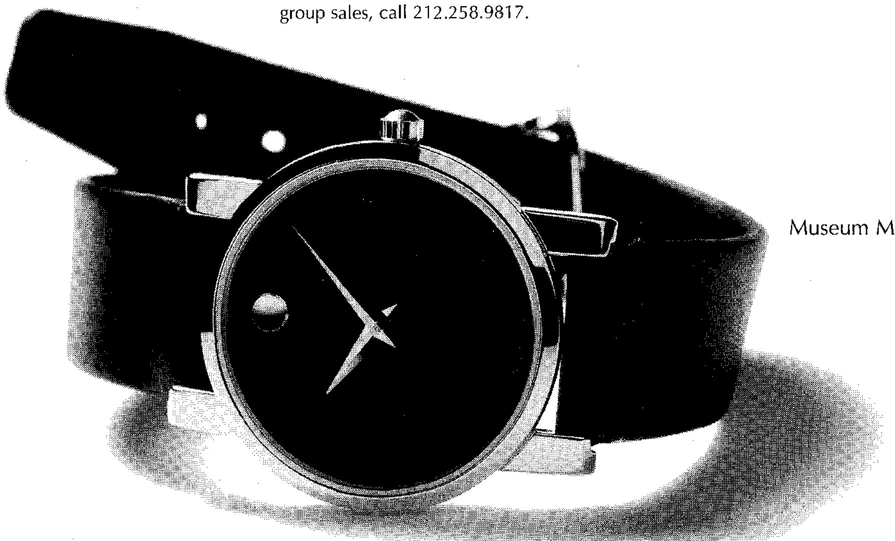

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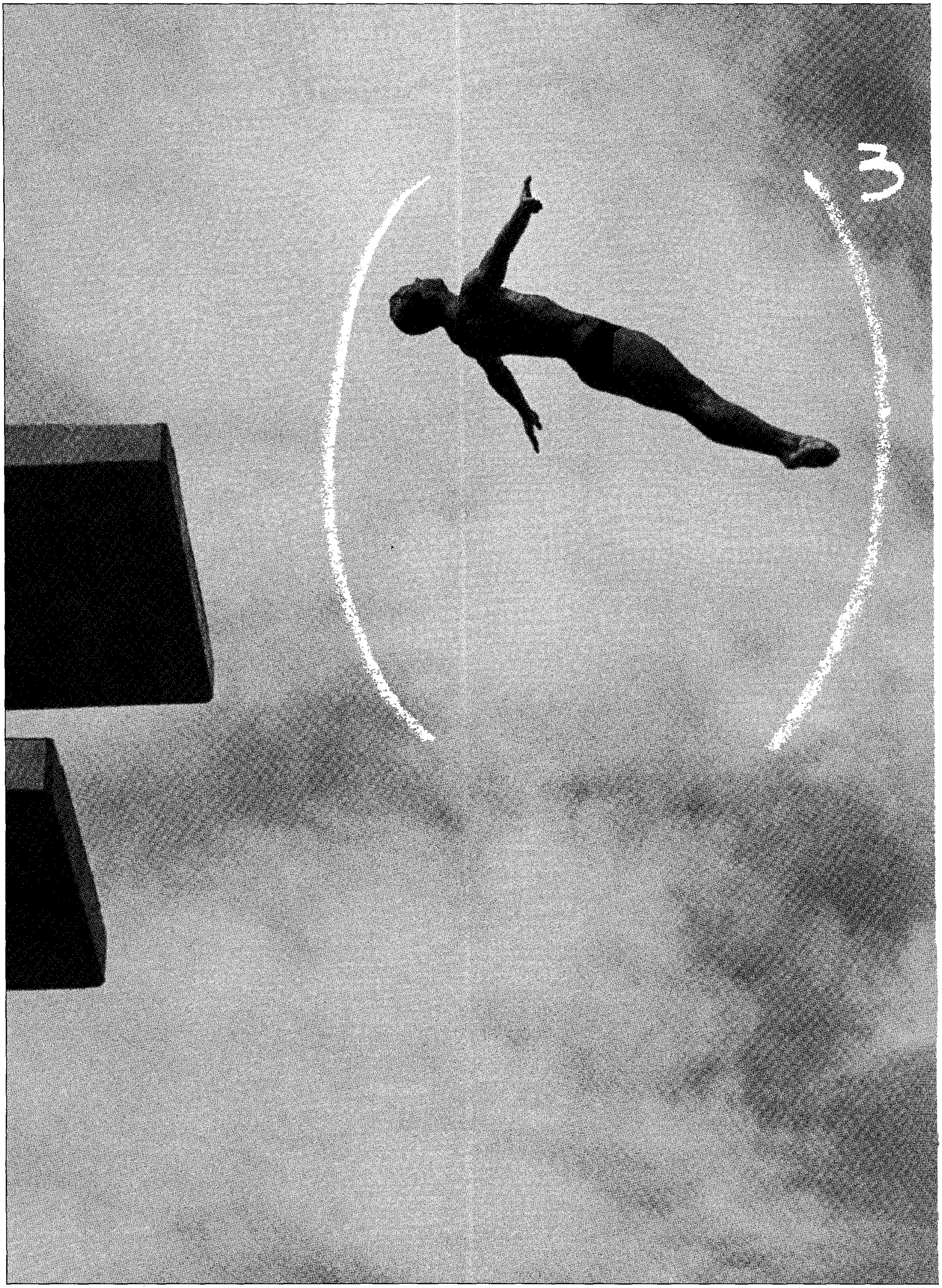
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fined a "gynephobe" as a person who is afraid of giants). (45 Bleecker, at 45 Bleecker St. 307-4100.)

GORE VIDAL'S THE BEST MAN
Gore Vidal's sophisticated, elegant, and damned entertaining 1960 play about the politics of politics, whose mots are as eerily accurate for Shrub and Al as they were, originally, for Adlai and Tricky Dick. (10/2/00) (Virginia, 245 W. 52nd St. 239-6200. Closes Dec. 31.)

THE HOSTAGE
Brendan Behan's 1960 play is set in that year, a moment of relative peace in Ireland, and it raises the question of whether anyone other than a few fanatics really cared anymore about the country's entanglement with England. Forty years on, Behan's political views are still fresh, and the play itself is a fascinating mixture of tragedy and fun, like a good pub tale. The talented cast is directed by Charlotte Moore. (Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St. 727-2737. Closes Dec. 31.)

THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA
The National Asian American Theatre Company is known for opening up the classics with all-Asian performances, and they've done it again with this stark, lovely, and evocative production. A fine cast and chorus perform the Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca's 1935 drama, in which the widowed Bernarda imprisons her five daughters and orders them to mourn their stepfather for eight years. Directed by Chay Yew, who also adapted Lorca's text. (INTAR II, 508 W. 53rd St. 718-623-1672. Closes Dec. 23.)

JANE EYRE
The musical. Marla Schaffel is Jane; James Barbour is Rochester. With a book by John Caird and a score by Paul Gordon. Directed by Mr. Caird and Scott Schwartz. (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 307-4100.)

JESUS HOPPED THE 'A' TRAIN
A six-week encore run of Stephen Adly Guirgis's drama about the relationship between two convicts in protective custody at Riker's Island. Philip Seymour Hoffman is the director. (East 13th Street Theatre, 136 E. 13th St. 239-6200. Closes Dec. 31.)

JULIUS CAESAR
The British-American Aquila Theatre Company's modern-dress staging of Shakespeare's play. (Clark Studio Theatre, 70 Lincoln Center Plaza. 279-4200. Closes Dec. 23.)

JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK
Even a spirited performance by Jim Norton, as the feckless, braggart "paycock" of the title, can't get this otherwise flat Roundabout Theatre production of Sean O'Casey's 1924 tragicomedy off the ground. (Gramercy Theatre, 127 E. 23rd St. 777-4900. Closes Dec. 23.)

KIKI AND HERB: JESUS WEPT
The cabaret duo also known as Justin Bond and Kenny Mellman, in their new Christmas show. (Fez, 380 Lafayette St. 533-2680. Closes Dec. 30.)

THE LAST OF THE THORNTONS
Horton Foote's new drama stars Hallie Foote, his daughter, as Alberta Thornton, the last living member of a powerful small-town Texas clan. Alberta's mental faculties are decaying at a nursing home; in the dayroom, the aging patients and their visitors (including Estelle Parsons) reminisce about family members we never get to meet. It's not a setup that makes for action or character development; the resulting experience is at times depressing and befuddling, but never really moving or poignant. (Signature Theatre Company, 555 W. 42nd St. 244-7529.)

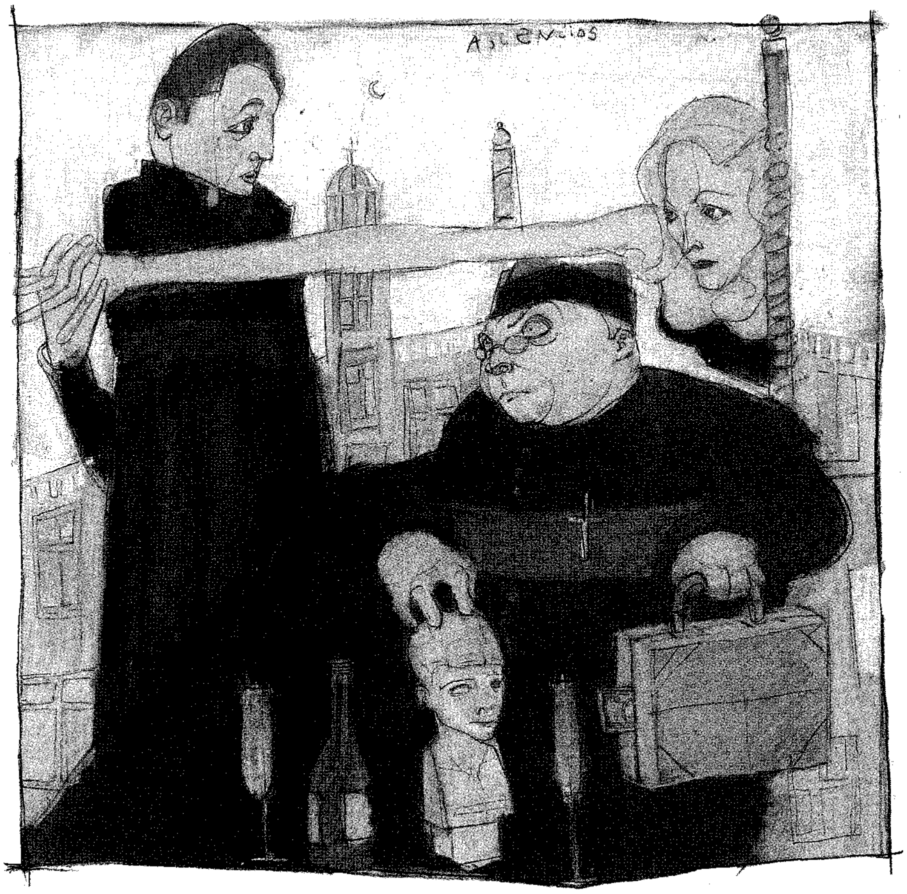
LIVING IN THE WIND
Cheryl Freeman and Chad L. Coleman portray married ex-slaves trying to rebuild their lives after the Civil War, in a romantic drama by Michael Bradford. (American Place, 111 W. 46th St. 239-6200. Closes Dec. 31.)

LYPSINKA! THE BOXED SET
The star (a.k.a. John Epperson) makes her first concert appearance in seven years. (Westbeth Theatre Center, 151 Bank St. 307-4100. Closes Dec. 30.)

MAYBE BABY, IT'S YOU
Love in the big city, explained with many laughs by the show's accomplished writer-performers, Charlie Shanian and Shari Simpson. There's an undercurrent of sweetness and longing which makes the evening more than a series of skits. (Theatre at St. Luke's, 308 W. 46th St. 239-6200.)

MENOPAUSAL GENTLEMAN
Peggy Shaw gives an encore performance of her one-woman lounge act, about being fifty-three and passing for a thirty-five-year-old man. Dec. 21-22 at 7:30. (La Mama, 74A E. 4th St. 475-7710.)

OLD MONEY
A new play by Wendy Wasserstein, under the direction of Mark Brokaw. John Cullum, Mary Beth Hurt, and Dan Butler are in the cast. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Mitzi E. Newhouse, Lincoln Center. 239-6200.)



"Tiny Alice," by Edward Albee, at Second Stage.

PETE 'N' KEELY
A pair of singing stars, formerly a married duo, are reunited on a television variety show in 1968, in a musical comedy by James Hindman. With sets by Ray Klausen and costumes by Bob Mackie. (John Houseman, 450 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

PRINCESS TURANDOT
Darko Tresnjak's new play was inspired by Gozzi's 1792 fable, the operas of Puccini and Busoni, "The Arabian Nights," and the films of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. (McGinn/Cazale, Broadway at 76th St. 206-1515. Closes Dec. 30.)

PROOF
The Manhattan Theatre Club's staging of David Auburn's drama, starring Mary-Louise Parker, has reopened on Broadway. Daniel Sullivan is the director. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 239-6200.)

THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW
Rather than a revival of Richard O'Brien's 1973 musical, a glam tribute to fifties horror flicks, Christopher Ashley's production is an unsexy and oddly earnest homage to the 1975 cult-movie adaptation. The only air of self-parody comes from the impish Dick Cavett; as the narrator, he gives the show a shot of vitality with his improvised standup shtick and, if you're lucky, his version of the Moonwalk. The rest of the casting is inspired (although Lea DeLaria and Joan Jett are sadly underused), but the performers can't really compete with their celluloid counterparts. (Circle in the Square, 50th St. west of Broadway. 239-6200.)

THE SEARCH FOR SIGNS OF INTELLIGENT LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE
Lily Tomlin is back on Broadway in the one-woman, thirteen-character show written for her by her longtime collaborator, Jane Wagner, and what's not to love about that? Tomlin is terrific—moving, funny, and as lithe and vibrant as she was when she first performed the show here, fifteen years ago. If anything, her characterizations are better now: they're grittier and less tinged with whimsy. Wagner's observations are so trenchant that you can't help wishing that she had written some new, up-to-date characters for this production, but, as it is, this is a chance to see a remarkable life force in action. (11/27/00) (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

SEUSSICAL
A new musical by the team of Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty which blends stories and characters from the books of Dr. Seuss. Frank Galati is the director. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 307-4100.)

THE SYRINGA TREE
A tour-de-force solo drama, written by and starring South African native and first-time playwright Pamela Gien, who gives an extraordinary performance in all twenty-three roles. It's a love story, really, about the strong, lasting bond between a white girl and her black nanny in South Africa, which begins in 1965 and continues through the following twenty years of turbulent and violent upheavals over apartheid. (Playhouse 91, at 316 E. 91st St. 307-4100.)

TABLETOP
Rob Ackerman's real-time comedy, a behind-the-scenes look at television-commercial making. (American Place, 111 W. 46th St. 239-6200.)

THE TALE OF THE ALLERGIST'S WIFE
Charles Busch's satire of New York intellectual angst, staged by Manhattan Theatre Club, has moved to

N. ASCENCIOS

Broadway. Linda Lavin, Tony Roberts, and Michele Lee star. Lynne Meadow is the director. (3/20/00) (Ethel Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 239-6200.)

TALLULAH HALLELUJAH!
Tovah Feldshuh's engaging portrait of Tallulah Bankhead is set in 1956, at a U.S.O. benefit, where the stage-and-screen siren (played by Feldshuh) regales the audience with the lowdown on her life, several marvellous standards, and a bunch of charmingly dirty limericks. (Douglas Fairbanks, 432 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

THEATRE FOR THE NEW CITY
"The Heathen Nativity," from Vermont's Bread and Puppet Theatre. Closes Dec. 23. ♦ "Brecht on Brecht," an Irondale Ensemble production featuring excerpts from the playwright's poetry, essays, and plays. Closes Dec. 23. (155 First Ave., at 10th St. 254-1109.)

TINY ALICE
Edward Albee loaded a lot of ideas into his mysterious 1964 drama—examinations of organized religion, capitalism, spiritual and sexual ecstasy, the nature of human existence in relation to God and reality—and the action moves along smoothly and thrillingly, up to a point. While the play ultimately leaves you scratching your head, Albee's way with language and stagecraft is so witty and acute that, like life, it's enjoyable as long as you don't think about it too much. Second Stage's fine revival—which includes some terrific performances, along with appropriately imposing set, light, and sound design—almost makes you forgive the final scene's overheated crucifixion allegory, in which the thundering heartbeat of an unknown power literally rattles the theatre. (307 W. 43rd St. 246-4422.)

THE UNEXPECTED MAN
In this small gem by Yasmina Reza, Alan Bates and the magnificent Eileen Atkins share a compartment on a Paris-to-Frankfurt train. He is a writer, and she, unbeknownst to him, is his ideal reader. Reza's artfulness in presenting their private reflections—his discontent, her insightful analysis of his books and rueful reminiscences of friendships—makes this a very grownup play about separateness and connection, about the art of life. Directed by Matthew Warchus. (11/6/00) (Promenade, Broadway at 76th St. 239-6200. Closes Dec. 31.)

WHAT THE BUTLER SAW
It's a treat to see Chloë Sevigny onstage, even in the New Group's inert production of Joe Orton's bawdy 1969 sex farce. The last few moments—when cases of mistaken identity have been solved and all sets of clothing have been returned to their rightful owners—are sublime, but the road that leads to them is rather rocky. The director Scott Elliot's pacing is off, and his actors have a difficult time muscling the Wildean dialogue. There are laughs to be had here; they just come paired with groans. (Theatre at St. Clement's, 423 W. 46th St. 279-4200. Closes Dec. 31.)

LONG RUNS

BLUE MAN GROUP/TUBES
Astor Place Theatre, 434 Lafayette St. 254-4370.

CABARET
Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 239-6200.

COPENHAGEN
Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

DIRTY BLONDE
Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

JITNEY
Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 505-0700.

KISS ME, KATE
Martin Beck, 302 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

THE MUSIC MAN
Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 307-4100.

SWING!
St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

HOLIDAY BOXED SETS

COMPLETE WORK
1923-1929
1930-1938
1939-1946
1947
1004
KATCHOR

BEN KATCHOR

THINKING INSIDE THE BOX
Boxed sets, which cascade into the stores around now in search of Christmas dollars, are a pedant's delight. Their heft gives them the feel of generosity, but the average listener soon finds he doesn't know quite what to do with them. Take one of the year's offerings from the hereafter: **"Ladies and Gentlemen ... The Grateful Dead"** (Arista), a four-disk box of the Dead's concerts at the Fillmore East in April, 1971. Nice. Chunky. And then what? "Truckin'." "China Cat Sunflower." "Morning Dew." Just like the great "Europe '72" set but a little ... worse. If you happen to be writing a biography of Jerry Garcia, you're in business. Otherwise, what's the point?

Or take the more promising six-disk set **"Miles Davis & John Coltrane"** (Columbia), which collects every single thing the two demigods recorded together on the label between 1955 and 1961. It's wonderful to listen to the two of them find their way together, and then to hear Trane begin to grow more radical than Miles. But how often are you going to play a disk with three consecutive versions of "Sweet Sue, Just You"—and with the incidental chatter between Miles and Leonard Bernstein preserved for posterity? The completist's curse also afflicts **"Charlie Parker: The Complete Savoy and Dial Studio Recordings"** (Atlantic)—it's full of wonders, terrific sound quality, and yet, four takes of "Billie's Bounce" in a row?

The big winners of the boxed-set season are as listenable, as pleasurable, as they are complete. The most obvious is Columbia's repackaging of Louis Armstrong's **"The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings."** These recordings, from the nineteen-twenties, are the Iliad and the Odyssey of jazz; everything comes out of them, and, pedantry aside, there is more joy, more abandon and invention here than any critic can describe. To get that same mix of historical significance and pure pleasure on the pop side, try the new Sam Cooke boxed set, **"The Man Who Invented Soul"** (RCA). When Muhammad Ali was still Cassius Clay, he used to go around playing Sam Cooke records and proclaiming *him* the Greatest; after revisiting "Chain Gang," "Tenderness," and "You Send Me," it's hard to argue.

The most haunted gift you could give this season is **"Bill Evans Trio: The Last Waltz"** (Milestone), an eight-disk compilation of the jazz pianist's last stand at the Keystone Korner, in San Francisco. It was September, 1980, and Evans, one of the most profound and lyrical instrumentalists of his era, was slowly killing himself with cocaine and heroin. He delivers his valedictory on the likes of "Nardis," "Polka Dots and Moonbeams," and "Autumn Leaves." With his work complete, Evans flew to New York to fulfill a weeklong engagement at Fat Tuesday's. He could only play two nights, and on September 15 he was gone. These Keystone dates are his farewell, as painful to listen to as the final recordings of Billie Holiday.

—*David Remnick*

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET
The final performances of "The Nutcracker," on Dec. 20 at 2 and 6, Dec. 21 and Dec. 27-28 at 6, Dec. 22-23 and Dec. 30 at 2 and 8, Dec. 24 at 1, Dec. 29 at 8, and Dec. 31 at 1 and 7. ♦ Jan. 2 at 8: Repertory returns with "Scotch Symphony," "Square Dance," and "The Four Seasons." (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 870-5570. Through Feb. 25.)

ALVIN AILEY
Dec. 20 at 8: "Blues Suite," "Fever Swamp," "Episodes," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 21 at 8: "Following the Subtle Current Upstream," "Bad Blood," and "Grace." ♦ Dec. 22 at 8: "Memoria," "Double Exposure," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 23 at 2: "Chocolate Sessions," "Ascension," "Episodes," and "Grace." ♦ Dec. 23 at 8: "Chocolate Sessions," "Sweet Bitter Love," "Following the Subtle Current Upstream," and "Phases." ♦ Dec. 24 at 3: "Chocolate Sessions," "Ascension," "Following the Subtle Current Upstream," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 24 at 7:30: "Double Exposure," "Bad Blood," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 26 at 8: A selection of Ailey classics. ♦ Dec. 27 at 8: "Episodes," "After Eden," and "Grace." ♦ Dec. 28 at 8: "Grace," "Following the Subtle Current Upstream," and "Phases." ♦ Dec. 29 at 8: "Blues Suite," "Cry," "Phases," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 30 at 2: "Hymn," "After Eden," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 30 at 8: "Bad Blood," "Episodes," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 31 at 3: "Blues Suite," "Cry," "Memoria," and "Phases." ♦ Dec. 31 at 7:30: "Double Exposure," "Following the Subtle Current Upstream," and "Revelations." (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

ELIOT FELD'S BALLET TECH
The company presents its third annual "NoT-CRACKER" season, which means no nods to the holidays in two programs. Dec. 19-20 and Dec. 28 at 7 and Dec. 23-24 and Dec. 29-31 at 2: "Papillon" and "The Jig Is Up." ♦ Dec. 21-22, Dec. 23, Dec. 26-27, and Dec. 29-30 at 7: "Apple Pie," "Coup de Couperin," and "Simon Sez." (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 242-0800.)

"DANCE IN PROGRESS"
For the past two months, the choreographers Kimberly Bartosik, Trajal Harrell, K. J. Holmes, and Cheng-Chieh Yu have been showing and commenting on one another's works. The quartet presents the unfinished pieces. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 255-5793. Dec. 21-23 at 8.)

NIGHT LIFE CONCERTS

JOE JACKSON
In what has to be the most bizarre career trajectory of the New Wave heroes, this forty-five-year-old formerly snotty songwriter from England (think Elvis Costello with piano chops) turned neo-Gershwin in 1982, making the great album "Night and Day." He then promptly squandered his critical capital with a poorly received "classical" record and a number of soundtracks. This year, Jackson returned to his piano-driven strengths with not one, but two, albums, the smoky "Summer in the City—Live in New York" and "Night and Day II." (Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 496-7070. Dec. 20 at 8.)

TRANS-SIBERIAN ORCHESTRA
This fancy-sounding ensemble is actually just one guy with many synthesizers and a group of rented musicians. The former producer Paul O'Neill created T.S.O.'s début album, "Christmas Eve and Other Stories," in 1996, and followed two years later with "The Christmas Attic." This year brings "Beethoven's Last Night," which puts T.S.O.'s ersatz Christmas music in a better light. (Beacon Theatre. Dec. 23 at 8.)

IBRAHIM FERRER
A night with the key players in the Buena Vista Social Club. Ferrer, a singer who has been called the Nat (King) Cole of Cuba, will lead his orchestra,

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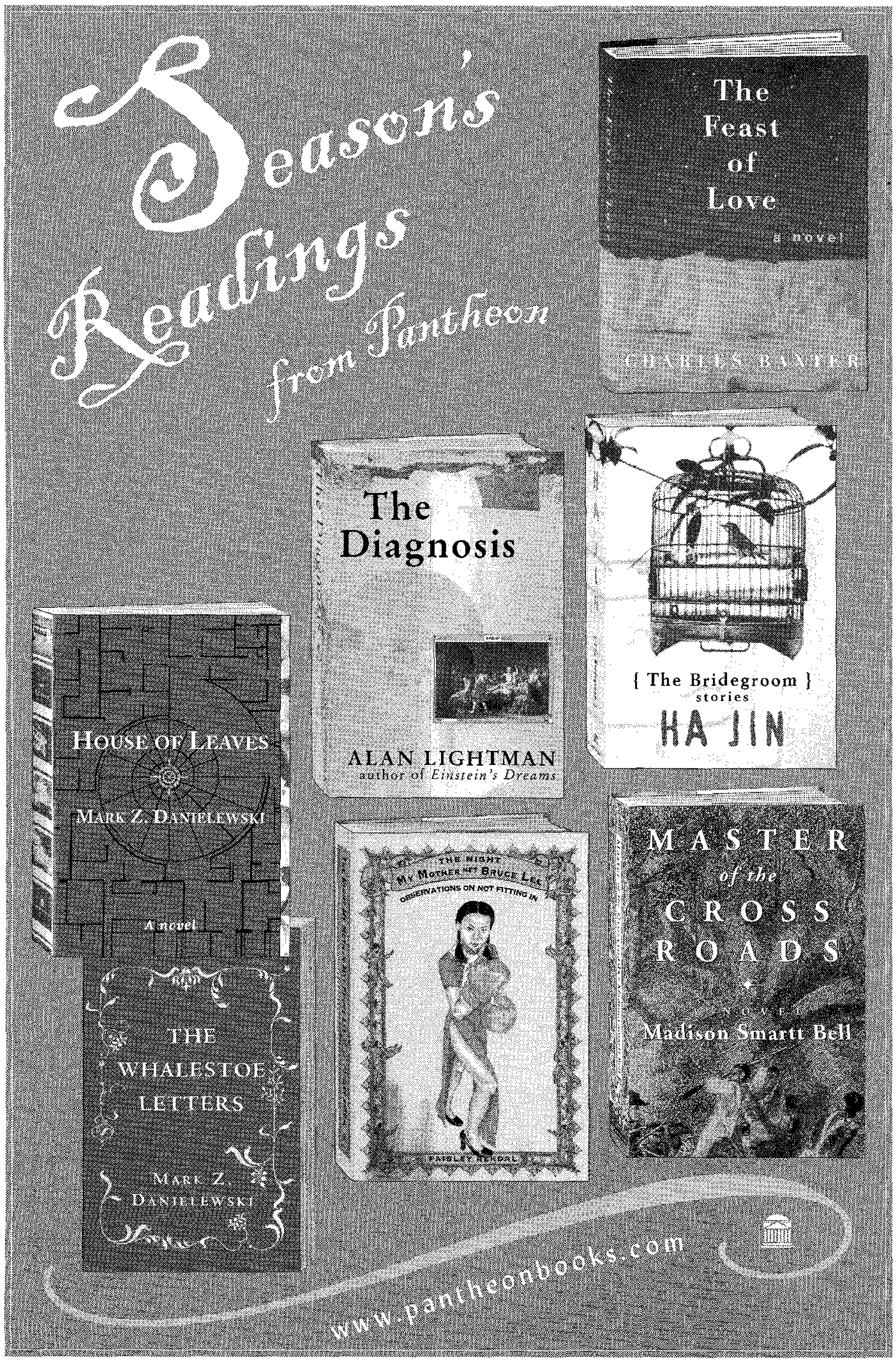

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and the fiery octogenarian pianist **Ruben González** will be backed by his own band. The vocalist **Omara Portuondo** rounds out the bill. (Beacon Theatre. Dec. 29-31 at 8.)

MARC ANTHONY
Spending the early arc of his English-language singing career in Ricky Martin's shadow is finally beginning to pay off. As the hype fades, Anthony's superior vocal talent now enjoys its own undeniable momentum. Live, he has the easy charm and exuberant confidence of a young Frank Sinatra. (Madison Square Garden. 307-7171. Dec. 31 at 9.)

CLUBS

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
243 W. 42nd St. (997-4144)—Dec. 22-23: Rock legend **Ronnie Spector** holds her very own Christmas spectacular. Dec. 28-30: The **Beach Boys,** sans Brian Wilson, warm up the end of the year.

BOTTOM LINE
15 W. 4th St., at Mercer St. (228-6300)—Dec. 22: Though the downtown stalwart David Johansen spent the year exploring yet another career path—he founded and fronted a band called the Harry Smiths, which devoted itself to the seminal folk recorded by the seminal musicologist of the same name—he hasn't abandoned his loudmouthed, brassy alter ego **Buster Poindexter** just yet. Catch Buster, along with his Spanish Rocketship Band, in a pre-Christmas concert. Dec. 29: The big, unabashed voice, and even bigger emotions, of **Betty Buckley.** Dec. 30-31: **Billy Bragg,** the blue-collar bard from Barking, England.

BROWNIES
169 Avenue A, at 10th St. (420-8392)—Dec. 22: The fiery antics of the **World/Inferno Friendship Society.** Dec. 23: The **Zambonis,** a Connecticut-based quartet that writes songs exclusively about ice hockey, may sound like a simple novelty act, but it scores repeatedly with a bunch of snappy little power-pop songs. Dec. 31: **Enon** is comprised of members of the bands Skeleton Key, Lapse, and Brainiac, and the music on its début album, "Believo!," defies easy description. Each of the eleven tracks is completely different; the album is an eclectic sound sculpture of noise rock, jangle pop, and spook rock touched by Enon's wand of electronic wizardry.

FEZ
380 Lafayette St. (533-7000)—Dec. 22: **Mike Viola,** the front man for the Candy Butchers, offers a solo show. The **Mingus Big Band** still packs them in every Thursday. Dining.

IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (777-6800)—Dec. 26: In the strange, parallel world of Japanese pop culture, **Eikichi Yazawa** is a rock star every bit as big as Rod Stewart or Mick Jagger. Born in Hiroshima in 1949, Yazawa first came to fame in the early seventies as the lead singer of the band Carol, which notched such hits as "Come on Woman" and "Funky Monkey Baby." As a solo artist, he introduced Western styles and production techniques to Japanese ears, selling more than ten million records. This show, his first ever in New York City, is in support of his latest album, "Stop Your Step." Yazawa's records may be hard to find in America, but his personal story is not—visit his official Web page for a novelized biography (www.toshiba-emi.co.jp/yazawa/history/novel/index.htm), written in the kind of comically stilted Japanese-to-English prose familiar to readers of VCR instruction manuals. A sample, describing Yazawa's shift in image for his 1992 concert tour: "Yazawa appeared with a new hairstyle that was very attractive to his fans and as he was singing rock 'n' roll they shouted to Yazawa 'You're very handsome!' " Dec. 30-31: **Maceo Parker.** A long-time veteran of James Brown's legendary line-ups, this tenor saxophonist also spent much of

the seventies as a pivotal member of George Clinton's Parliament/Funkadelic empire. Since then, he's put out a few straight-ahead jazz disks and a couple of Brown-style extravaganzas. Live, he can still thrill. ♦ The Swing Dance Society gathers here every Sunday, with sets from eight until midnight. For information on the Society, call 696-9737.

JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (539-8777)—Dec. 20 and Dec. 22: **Darlene Love**, whose voice was one of the birth cries of rock and roll, winds up her run of holiday shows.

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—**Drums and Tuba**, a highly infectious trio, drops by on Dec. 21. The band—tuba, drums, and guitar—laces its loop-filled songs with New Orleans-style grooves and some progressive-rock guitar heroics. Dec. 22: Folk and blues great

TABLES FOR TWO

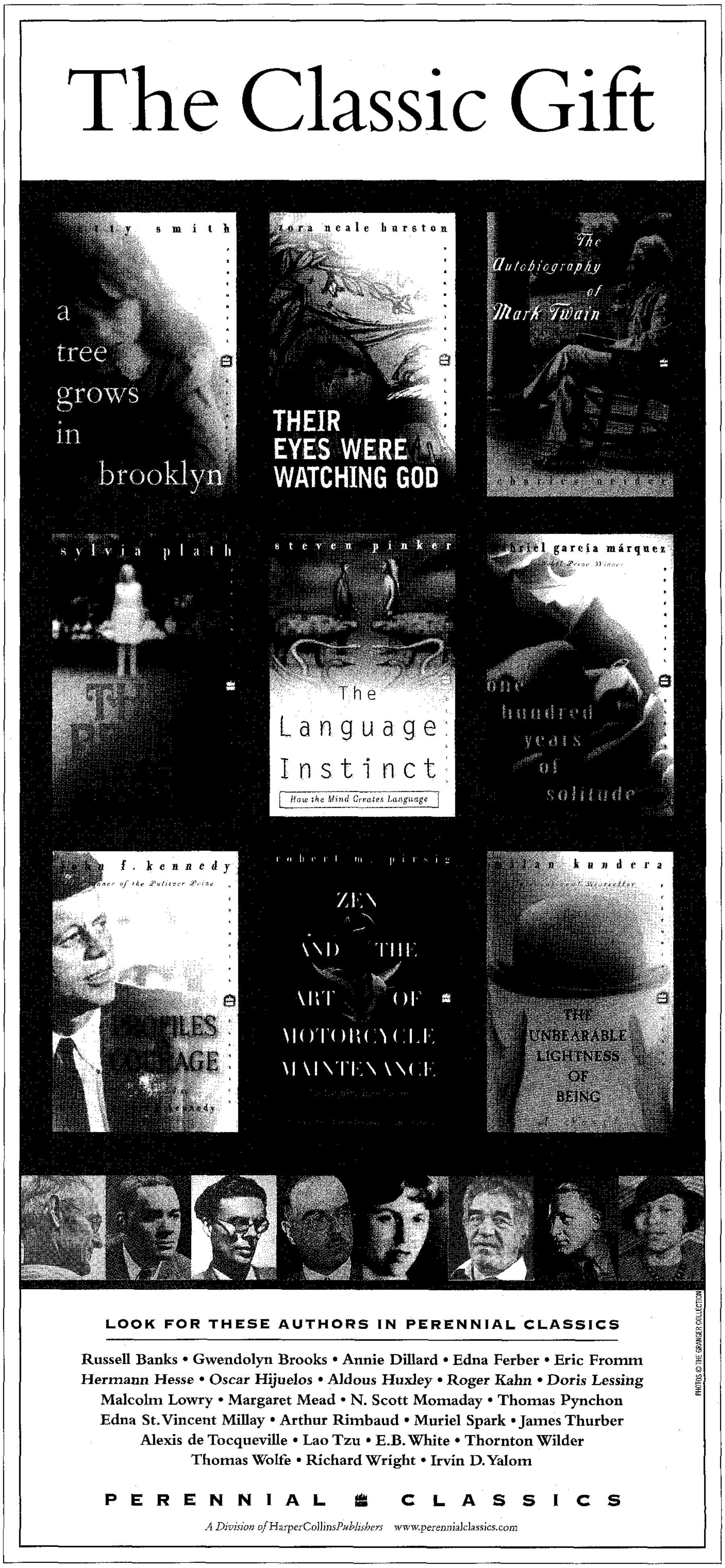
THE TASTING ROOM
72 E. First St. (358-7831)—On a short strip of the East Village known for its offbeat, intimate cafés (the earthy Prune and the exotic Chez Es Saada are a few doors down; the bistro Lucien is around the corner), this snug storefront spot is distinguished by its fresh all-American ingredients and blithe dinner-party air. Renée Alevras (who works the crowded brick-and-maple room wearing glitter on her face) and her chef husband Colin (who stays hidden in the basement kitchen) have the innocent enthusiasm of foodies begging for approval. "Seth just told me he'd rather eat here than watch the World Series," Renée tells a table of three, who just happen to know Seth. "Isn't that sweet?"

Forget the old appetizer-entrée-salad routine. The Alevrases want you to really sample their food. Each item on the short seasonal menu comes in tasting and sharing sizes. Three tasting-size servings are more than a meal, and if you eat with people who aren't averse to passing plates around, you end up getting a shot at everything on the menu. A dense and delicious oxtail stew goes well with a tart salad of roasted beets, watercress, sorrel, hard-boiled quail egg, and toasted-fennel-seed vinaigrette, but you can also go a heartier route by moving on to littleneck-clam chowder (with baby potatoes and a touch of chorizo) or the Miatake mushroom bowl (braised wild fungi from New York State, with croutons and fresh pea shoots). The roasted squab with collards and hominy is surprisingly good company for the oven-roasted squid with Japanese eggplant and, say, the fresh-ricotta-and-Vidalia-onion dip with green olives and oregano. But what the heck: order duck with lamb and lobster if you feel like it.

The menu's diversity calls for a versatile wine list, and the Alevrases offer more than three hundred American bottles ranging in price from $22 to $300 (and more than a dozen wines by the glass). To finish, there's a fine selection of American farmhouse cheeses or roasted Italian plums (they come with red-wine caramel, macadamia nuts, and whipped cream, and are especially good with a glass of California port).

Whatever you decide upon, Renée will be there to support you (after all, it's her restaurant). Appearing tableside, she observes the bottle of Big Break zinfandel that you ordered just because you liked the name. "That's an awesome wine," she says, before moving on to the next table, where she proceeds to trace the origins of the equally awesome Crispy Rice Treat Sundae. (Open Mondays through Saturdays for dinner only. Tasting dishes $5-$15; sharing dishes $9-$29.)

—*Emily Nunn*



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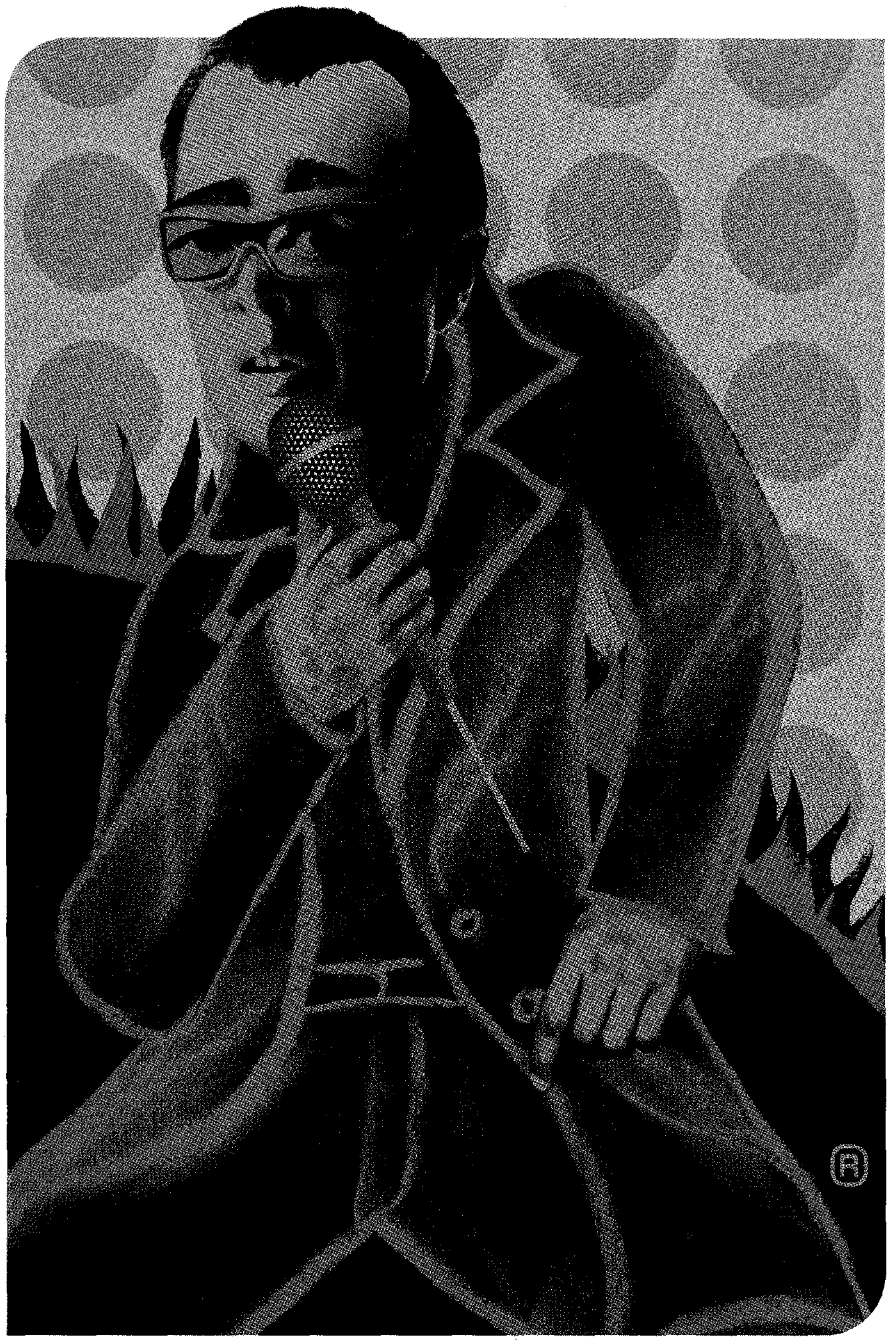

The Japanese rock-and-roll superstar Eikichi Yazawa, at Irving Plaza.

Odetta. Dec. 23-30: The **Jewish Music Festival** brings to town MC Paul Barman, Uri Cane, and many, many others.

VILLAGE UNDERGROUND
130 W. 3rd St. (777-7745)—Dec. 31: When **Joan Osborne** asked, "What if God was one of us?" she probably meant a commoner, not a red-hot pop star whose début album sold more than three million copies. In the five years since then, Osborne has come down from the firmament, thanks to record-label troubles, creative blockage, and a CD, "Righteous Love," that vanished upon release earlier this year. But she's a solid singer, and this small club show is sure to be a treat.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (581-3080)—Dec. 22-23: Lip troubles over the past decade have waylaid **Freddie Hubbard,** but the great hard-bop trumpeter isn't down for the count quite yet. Buoyed by the accomplished young players of the New Jazz Composers Octet (including the drummer **Nasheet Waits** and the saxophonist **Greg Tardy**), Hubbard is sure to tap into the restorative powers of jazz. Dec. 29-30: **Dave Leibman** hasn't let the vicissitudes of the music industry or the fickleness of the listening public stop him from going about his business; that is, creating adventurous new music that explores all the nooks and crannies of the jazz tradition. One of the few truly individual post-Coltrane soprano saxophonists—and a fine tenorman and flutist as well—Leibman is also a conceptualist who puts as much thought into his ensembles as he puts into each gleaming solo. This engagement, in which he'll trot out his new, eighteen-piece big band, promises to put all his extravagant talents as composer, arranger, and soloist on display. Dec. 31: **Jimmy Scott,** the jazz-pop singer with the ethereally androgynous voice. Dining.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (475-8592)—Through Dec. 24: **Cyrus Chestnut's** yearly holiday show finds the superior young pianist surrounded by obliging guests; this year the guitarist **Pat Martino,** the saxophonist **Gary Bartz,** the trumpeter **Brian Lynch,** the vibraphonist **Stefon Harris,** and the vocalist **Vanessa Rubin** bring cheer and chops to the stage.

CARLYLE HOTEL
Madison Ave. at 76th St. (744-1600)—The Café Carlyle, a snug, windowless enclave in the doorman district, features discreet waiters, wraparound pastel murals, and, through Dec. 31, **Bobby Short.** ♦ Across the hall, in Bemelmans Bar, **Barbara Carroll** is in attendance through Dec. 31.

IRIDIUM
48 W. 63rd St. (582-2121)—Through Dec. 24: Who would have imagined that an a-cappella horn ensemble made up of avant-leaning soloists would be celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary? The **World Saxophone Quartet** has thrived in spite of internal personality conflicts, changes in personnel, and the public's taste for neo-traditional jazz. They must be doing something right. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.**

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (576-2232)—Through Dec. 24: While not exactly the contemporary versions of Lester Young and Billie Holiday, the tenor saxophonist **Houston Person** and the vocalist **Etta Jones** make fetching music together, a tradition that started more than twenty-five years ago. Dec. 26-30: The **Tommy Flanagan** trio. The world's finest jazz pianist settles in with his trio, featuring bassist **Peter Washington** and the brilliant drummer **Albert Heath.** Dec. 31: In one of the more unexpected career resurgences in recent years, **Andy Bey** has risen from being a jazz footnote—dig out those late-sixties Horace Silver recordings—to a respected vocal stylist. Indulging in sonorous tones that threaten to rumble the floorboards, and tempos that wouldn't stir a lazing dog, Bey is an acquired taste. Those under his spell, though, can't get enough of his ultra-romantic art. Dining.

UP OVER JAZZ CAFÉ
351 Flatbush Ave., at Seventh Ave., Brooklyn (718-398-5413)—Dec. 21-23: The **John Hicks-Elise Wood** quartet. The combination of Hicks's fulsome piano and Wood's delicate flute seems unlikely to yield beautiful music, but this occasional team has been subverting expectations for years now. Dec. 31: The **James Spaulding** quintet.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (255-4037)—Dec. 26-31: **Dr. Michael White's Original Liberty Jazz Band.** Let purists debate the validity of this outfit's approach to the music of Armstrong, Morton, and Dodds. White's band positively revels in the conventions of collective improvisation, counterpoint, and the two-beat stomp; its glee turns history into something vividly sensual. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ZINC BAR
90 W. Houston St. (477-8337)—Dec. 21: The exceptional Cuban guitarist and singer **Juan-Carlos Formell.**

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (879-5500)—**"The Still-Lifes of Evaristo Baschenis: The Music of Silence"** presents eighteen paintings by the seventeenth-century northern-Italian artist. In the absence of more compelling virtues, these pictures of kitchen equipment and musical instruments are displayed to maximize awareness of their "consummate technical achievement." The show is full of treatises on perspective, and the room is divided, so that it has paintings on one side and instruments on the other, including a Stradivarius violin. This layout happily makes it impossible to see models and paintings in one glance—which would do both a disservice—but, farther on, the curators have hung Caravaggio's portrait of a pink-cheeked young boy with a lute alongside the last Baschenis. The arrangement, intended to point out Baschenis's influence, serves only to show his limitations. Through March 4. ♦ **"The Year One: Art of the**

JOHN RITTER

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Ancient World East and West," a selection of antiquities from the permanent collection, all of which were created around 1 A.D. Through Jan. 14. ♦ **"Art and the Empire City"** presents paintings, photographs, and decorative art popular in New York between the completion of the Erie Canal, in 1825, and the beginning of the Civil War, in 1861. Through Jan. 7. ♦ **"Rain of the Moon: Silver in Ancient Peru."** Through April 22. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—With **"Open Ends,"** a multiplex array of thematic mini-shows addressing art since 1960, MOMA leaps into the swamp of the contemporary art world and drowns. This is the third of three grand surveys of the museum's collections; the illuminating second, "Making Choices," proved that curatorial rethinking works best at a range of a half-century or so. "Open Ends," in territory that still lacks basic discriminations, runs to such pitiful expedients as a section of works that are all white. Profiting from the muddle are self-contained touchstones like Cindy Sherman's complete "Film Stills" and Gerhard Richter's stunning suite of paintings about the Baader-Meinhof terrorists, "October 18, 1977," which may be the most all-around significant art work of the last forty years. A wondrous video installation in which the Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist pertly smashes car windows with a flower steals the show. Watching it is like slipping out of art's troubled recent past into a smiling near future. Through Jan. 30. (Open Saturdays through Tuesdays, and Thursdays, 10:30 to 5:45; Fridays, 10:30 to 8:15.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (423-3500)—One design icon salutes another: the museum devotes its spiralling Frank Lloyd Wright spaces to an exhibition that measures the impact of Giorgio Armani, the original relaxed-fit couturier. Through Jan. 10. (Open Sundays through Wednesdays, 9 to 6; Fridays and Saturdays, 9 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-3676)—The Sol LeWitt retrospective opens with a stunning contrast: a trio of the arch-Conceptualist's most severe white grid sculptures sit in front of "Loopy Doopy," a giant new mural of red and purple undulating curves. As a flash card of the climate change in the art world—from the age of Judd to the age of Gehry—the juxtaposition is a delight. The show as a whole, however, is a curiously lukewarm pleasure. There's lots to like: LeWitt's art is full of handsome geometric designs and an implicitly generous spirit. Long before Napster, he designed art works that could be reproduced by anyone (at least, anyone with the patience to follow instruction-kit titles like "Ten thousand lines, about ten inches long, covering the wall evenly.") But LeWitt's populism comes at a cost. His sculptures and murals, for all their variations in material, palette, and geometry, are seldom less—but never more—than likable. It's a very short step from here to Ikea. Through Feb. 25. ♦ A retrospective of the photographs of Edward Steichen. Through Feb. 4. ♦ **"Roni Horn: Still Water (The River Thames, for Example), 1999."** Through Jan. 14. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 11 to 6, and Friday evenings until 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART
Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—A retrospective of Lee Krasner's work ends its national tour in the artist's birthplace. Through Jan. 7. ♦ **"Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes, and Rage"** presents videos, clothing and accessories, manuscripts of lyrics, F.B.I. letters, magazine covers, and installations that catalogue reactions to the genre. Through Dec. 31. ♦ **"Nardo di Cione: The Reuniting of an Altarpiece."** Through Feb. 18. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5; Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Fifth Ave. at 104th St. (534-1672)—**"The City Shops"** offers annotated photographs of storefronts from the most basic—an egg dealer—through produce stands, night clubs, and a tire shop, complete with a "Flats Fixed" advertisement. Martha Cooper's color documents, shown in what look like photocopies, were taken as part of her regular collaboration with the New York Center for Urban Folk Culture, and are full of information. Fred W. McDarrah's black-and-white prints, some published in the *Village Voice,* where he has been the photo editor since 1959, isolate small landmarks of the city's recent history, including storefronts of various key non-retail outlets, such as churches, night clubs, and the Black Panther Party offices; the windows of Food, SoHo's seventies grocery store and informal community center; and a 1969 Greenwich Village Mattachine Society sign, at the Stonewall Inn, asking fellow-homosexuals to keep party noise down for the sake of neighborhood good will. Through April 15. ♦ **"Toy Stories"** opened recently, to celebrate the return of the Stettheimer doll house from a year off for cleaning; it's renovated to its original twenties glory, with a miniature gallery full of abstract originals, including a mini Duchamp. In the next room, a neighborhood of other doll houses, including one made of glass, has sprouted up beside cases of early sock monkeys and bottle-cap Mickey Mice. A memory lane of mass-produced toys showcases hoops (wooden and hula), pea shooters, roller skates, and such board games as Round the World with Nellie Bly and (that mailroom classic) The District Messenger, or Merit Rewarded. (Open Wednesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 5; Sundays, noon to 5.)

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER
22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City (718-784-2084)—**"Disasters of War"** is actually a trio of sanguinary shows. Two are superb: a complete edition of the Francisco de Goya etchings that give the exhibition its name and a large group of watercolor war fantasies by the outsider's outsider Henry Darger. Darger's plucky Vivian Girls endure battles and atrocities (disemboweled children are a motif) in scenes of flabbergasting charm. Then there are Jake and Dinos Chapman's Goya-pastiche etchings and photo-tableaux with toys, which gloat on military gore in the spirit of a nasty kid who would likely go to pieces if he had a nosebleed. Through Feb. 25. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, noon to 6.)

GALLERIES-UPTOWN

Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

SUE COE
More than seventy-five of the hundred-plus images here were created by other printmakers, from 1633 to 1938; they help delineate the artistic origins of Coe's recent etching cycle, "The Tragedy of War." The preparatory rooms depict battles and trauma, including a murky Goya lynching whose title is translated "That's Tough." By all rights, this windup should make Coe's work less of a shock, but it doesn't. "Neighbors, Wearing Black Ski Masks" and "Raped Before Being Killed" simply have a stronger affect on the heartbeat than their neighbors. Her toughest work, "The Rape of a Child," which hangs in backroom-like segregation behind a potted palm, actually goes only slightly further than Otto Dix's 1924 "Soldier and a Nun (Rape)." Through Jan. 6. (Galerie St. Étienne, 24 W. 57th St. 245-6734.)

This Delhi coronation scene, "Group of Shan Chiefs," appears with photographs of India by Samuel Bourne and his Bourne and Shepherd agency, at Sepia (see Photography).

ALKAZI COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY

GEORGE NICK
The seventy-year-old plein-air painter has often declared that he has no imagination. What interests him are real things—streets, houses, sofas, cars, and, above all, direct sunlight, which he paints with a joyous, jolting immediacy. Nick's exhibitions typically have a point-and-shoot feel: in this show, views from trips abroad (to France, Italy, Israel) hang side by side with portraits of cars (a Bentley, an Aston Martin, a Porsche) and New England streets. The centerpiece, a view across ruddy Back Bay façades up toward the blue glass tower of the John Hancock building, has a kind of intricate, Hopperesque solidity. But where Hopper's sunlight registers as yearning, Nick's is a kind of adrenaline. Through Dec. 23. (Fischbach, 24 W. 57th St. 759-2345.)

SOL LEWITT
As a coda to his current Whitney retrospective, the amiable Conceptualist offers a sampling of recent works. The most spectacular is "Wall Drawing #958," a.k.a. "Splat," a giant, polychromatic jagged shape that looks, as the title suggests, like a Macy's Day Parade float that has come

to an ecstatically abrupt demise. It also suggests a cross-section of its neighbor, "Splotch 3," one of LeWitt's new candy-corn sculptures. The subtlest pleasure, though, is a set of gouache paintings of looping, branching lines, painted, one imagines, as an homage—or maybe as a challenge—to Brice Marden. Through Feb. 3. (Pace Wildenstein, 32 E. 57th St. 421-3292.)

FRED TOMASELLI
Some fans of Tomaselli—the guy who makes pictures by imbedding actual psychoactive drugs in transparent resin—were vexed last year by an attempted masterpiece that was shown at the Whitney's Philip Morris annex. Though impressively intricate, the vast "Gravity's Rainbow" was muted in color and tasteful to a fault. We can relax now. The artist's teeming new show, keyed to themes of utopia and dystopia, is as fearlessly vulgar as it is resplendent, piling into the gaps between art and decoration and those between art and literature with uncalled-for vim. Through Jan. 20. (James Cohan, 41 W. 57th St. 755-7171.)

Short List

JOAN MIRÓ
Salander-O'Reilly, 20 E. 79th St.
879-6606. Through Jan. 6.

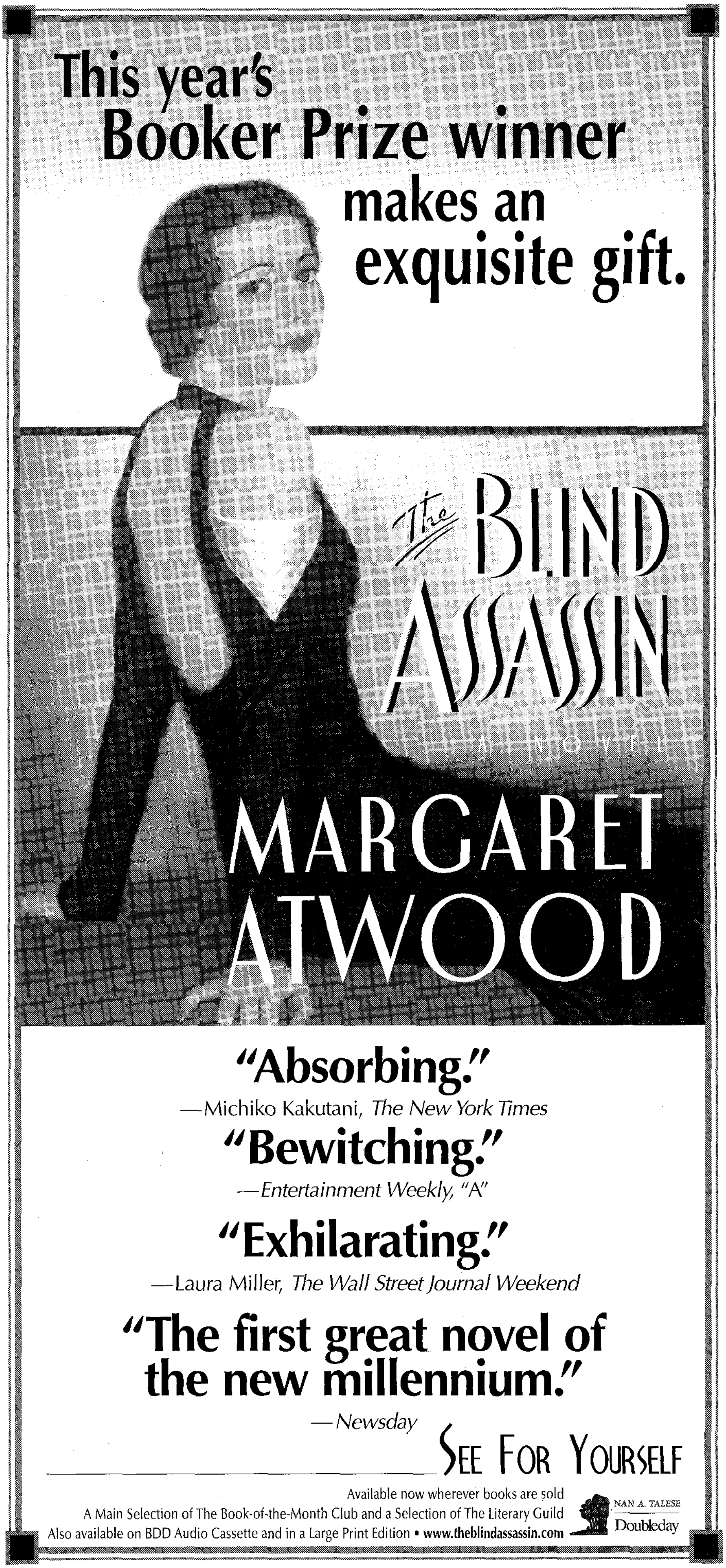
GALLERIES-CHELSEA

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES
Twenty-four billboards in four boroughs of the city display an image by the late, irreplaceable Felix Gonzalez-Torres: a black-and-white photograph of a distant seagull soaring in a luminous charcoal-gray sky. The 1995 work, which also fills a wall at the Andrea Rosen gallery, is at once coolly lovely and go-for-the-throat rhapsodic. Gonzalez-Torres had a genius for precipitating lyrical feeling by laconic means, and the viewer in the street must cope with unanticipated emotion. Creative Time sponsored the billboards, through Dec. 31. The gallery show continues through Jan. 13. (524 W. 24th St. 627-6000.)

PIOTR UKLAŃSKI
Famous for installing flashing disco flooring (Carl Andre gone Studio 54) and infamous for making still photos of movie actors playing Nazis (the British press was outraged), this Polish-born Pop Conceptualist has little interest in signature style. The eclectic works in this show, collectively titled "The Deep," range from the ephemeral—water spilled across the floor like Lynda Benglis lite—to the monumental—a billboard-size mural of nubile naked bodies arranged in the shape of a skull. Depth, death, it's all the same. For Uklański, cynicism and beauty go hand in hand. Through Jan. 13. (Gavin Brown's Enterprise, 436 W. 15th St. 627-5258.)

MARY WEATHERFORD
It was only a matter of time before Bob Ross, the cheerful guru of TV painting, found his way to Chelsea. Duly watered down and ironized, his influence floats through this California artist's offhand landscapes. Most consist of little more than a shape or two: a humped horizon with maybe a cloud, a few reeds, or a little moon floating tranquilly in the sky. In a similarly Rossian "Why not?" spirit, Weatherford adds jokey attachments—seashells, starfish, or sponges—to the surface of the paintings. Her best images aren't only faux-kitsch. They have a kind of resonant slightness, as if each contained a tiny pearl of embarrassed lyricism. Through Jan. 6. (Debs, 525 W. 26th St. 643-2070.)

"COMPRESSION"
This intelligent meditation on the influence of the digital on the material opens with a barely visible wall drawing by Michelle Grabner, a pale rainbow of crystal-flecked flocking, which seems to be equal parts LeWitt and Warhol in his "Diamond Dust" days. Jeremy Blake's hypnotic DVD "painting," which morphs from architectural to abstract, vies for the depth-in-flatness award. The darkened downstairs gallery is filled with Stephen Hendee's installation of piled plastic cubes, in glowing lime, lemon, and tangerine. It suggests a two-dimensional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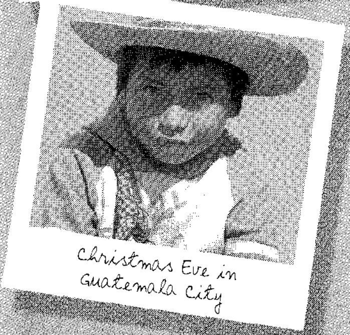

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ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

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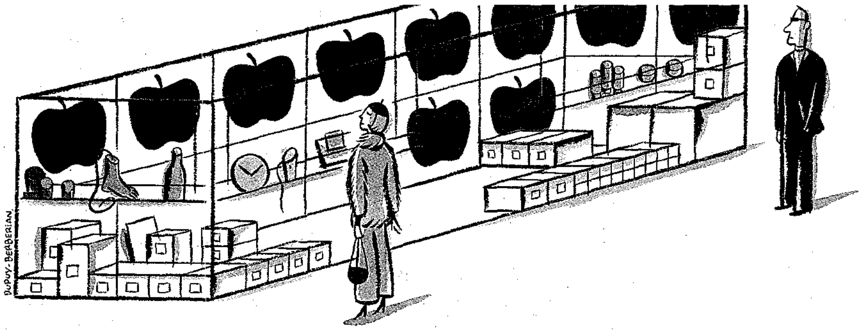
At **MOSS** (146 Greene St.; 226-2190), a gleaming white design emporium in SoHo, the stock is not just unusually imaginative but also exhibits a definite sense of humor. If Cindy Sherman's Limoges soup tureen (the artist's visage substitutes for that of Madame de Pompadour) is a little pricey at $11,000, there are gently curving stainless-steel serving pieces by Ettore Sottsass ($50 for a set of two), along with bottles of Comme des Garçons Odeur 53, a post-modern perfume that aspires to smell like a combination of, among other things, nail polish, wet laundry, and burned rubber ($20). A glass-enclosed alcove called St. Nick's Nook has prewrapped gifts unlike anything at the local department store, including a painted mahogany model of the Concorde for $175 and a life-size blue foot made of glycerin, and hanging on a rope, for $75. "We had dead-bird soap earlier in the year," a store manager confides, "but we thought the foot was more Christmassy."

There may be no blue-soap feet at **DIMSON HOMMA** (20 E. 67th St.; 439-7950), but there are plenty of other curiosities: the place is like an upscale, elegant flea market. Robert Homma, who wears his hair in a long black braid, recommended not just a set of four porcelain bowls from Kyoto packaged in a wooden box ($55) but also a signed first edition of Ludwig Bemelmans' "Madeline and the Bad Hat" ($750), a pair of seamless woolen-felt slippers made by a Japanese wunderkind who shapes the fabric by means of a water jet ($88), a glass ladybug blown by "one little old man in Venice" ($40), and the shop's own crystallized ginger, imported from Australia and featuring a picture of the young Ginger Rogers on the six-ounce box ($15).



DUPUY-BERBERIAN

Things are a bit more frenetic at **HOTEL VENUS** (382 West Broadway; 966-4066), a downtown shop that boasts a wiggery, a booming sound system—a recent visit found the Mohawk-sporting sales staff crooning along with Whitney Houston's "Yes, Jesus Loves Me"—and enough campy merchandise to get you through any number of shopping crises. Though gold leather Elvis jackets are $490, and Mrs.-Claus-as-French-maid ensembles are $124, there are also lots of quirky stocking stuffers, including a desk lamp shaped like a bouffant-haired lady who looks like Lypsinka and has a light socket sprouting from her scalp ($20).

If all of the above seems a little ambitious this late in the game, **BEST OF SCOTLAND** (581 Fifth Ave., 6th floor; 644-0403) can supply items made of cashmere—a fiber virtually no one dislikes—in an atmosphere and with prices that recall an unpretentious mill shop. There's a huge variety here, all of it, according to the shop's proprietor, excellent. "It's twenty-four-karat stuff!" he says. "It's comparable to Ballantyne and Pringle! You can go to a fancier shop, but you can't get better!" One of the best-selling items, a man's cabled crewneck, is $310; a thick scarf from Begg of Ayr ("As good as Loro Piana!") is $85, and there's even a small, satin-bound cashmere blanket ($275) in pink or blue, for someone's first Christmas.

—*Lynn Yaeger*

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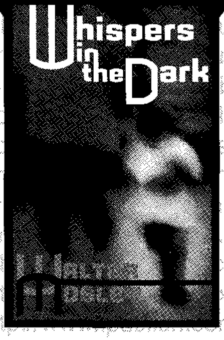
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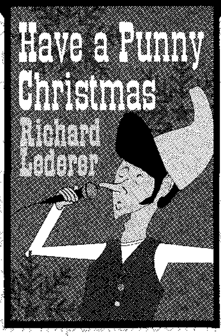
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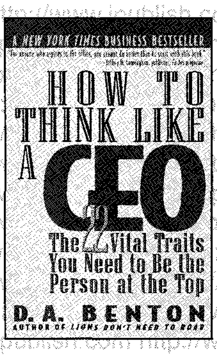
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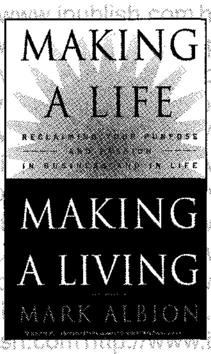
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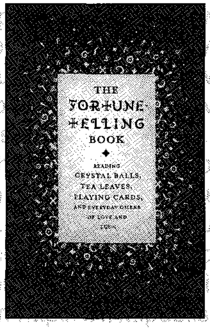
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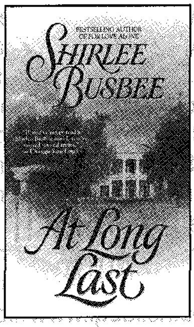
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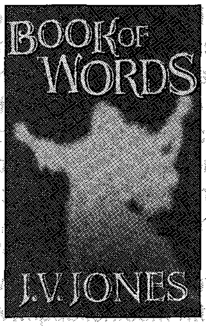
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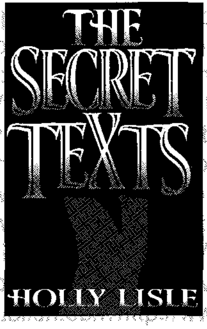
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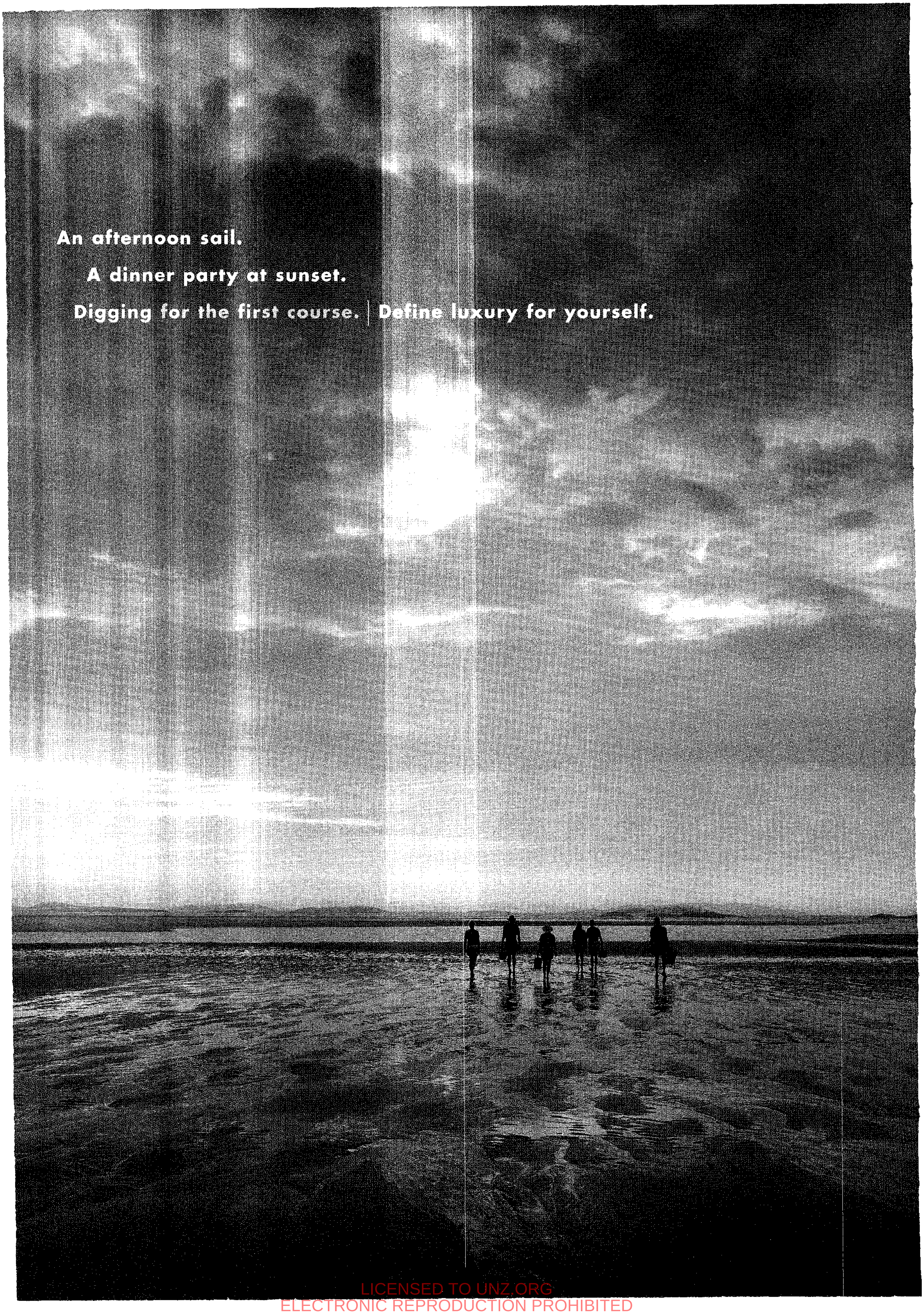
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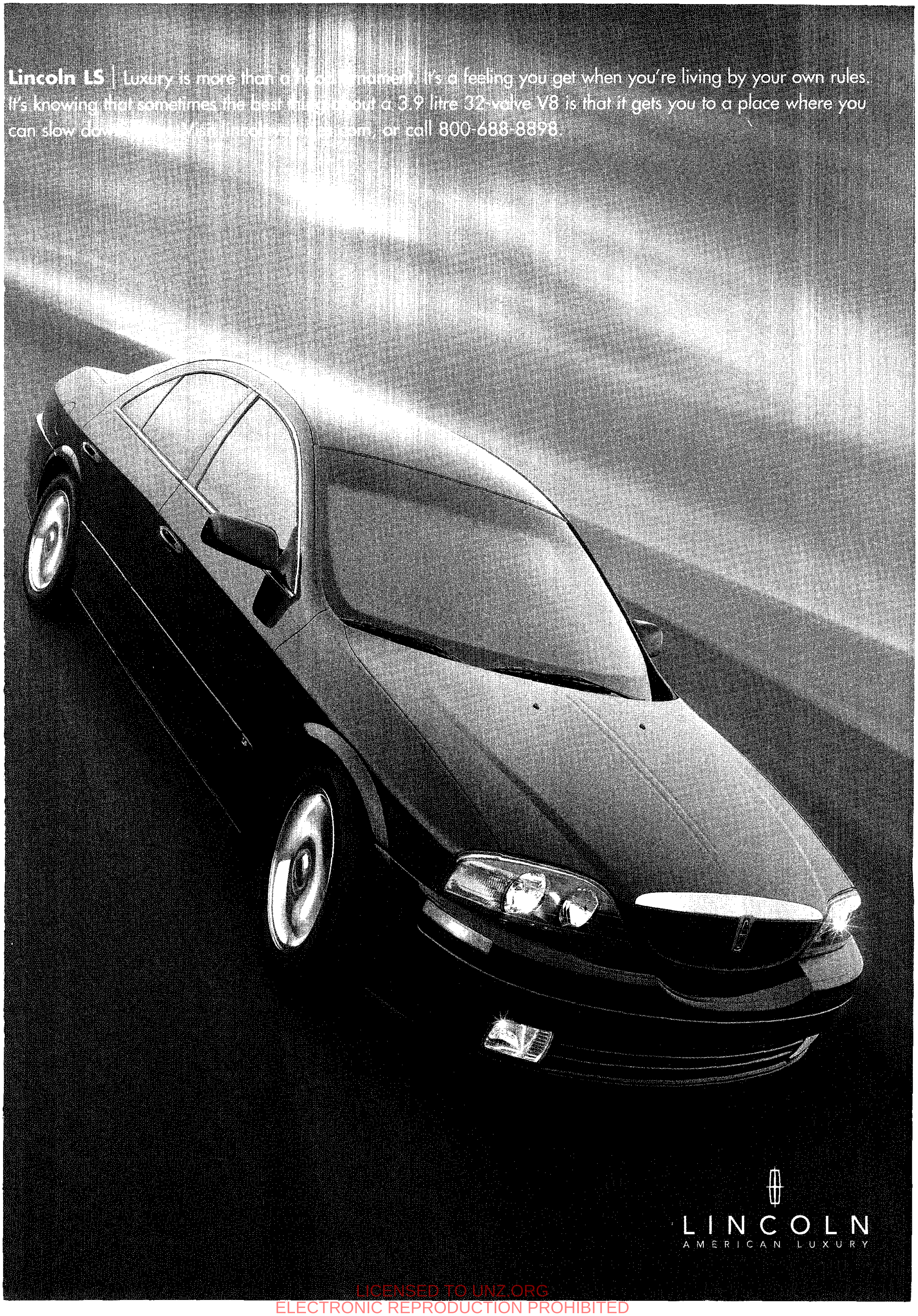

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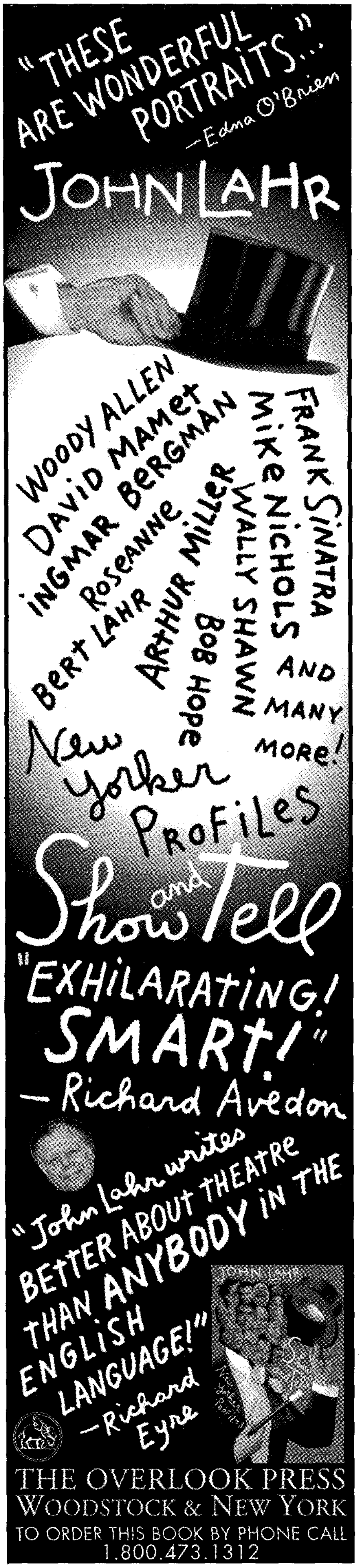

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grid sprung monstrously to life, trapping you in a digital space. Through Jan. 13. (Feigen, 535 W. 20th St. 929-0500.)

"WINE, WOMEN, AND WHEELS"
This action-packed show devoted to fast cars and faster women is equal parts kick-ass and pop culture. Guy Overfelt's life-size inflatable nylon Trans-Am is flanked by Nancy Floyd's deadpan photographs of guns and the women who love them and Jane Gang's graphite sketches, of strippers, drawn on bar receipts. Hope Atherton's sculptures are the biggest surprise; her mini-dioramas put a feminist spin on the pulp sensibility of cult illustrator Frank Frazetta, without losing any of the prehistoric grisliness. It's "Conan the Barbarian" meets "Clan of the Cave Bear." Through Jan. 21. (White Columns, 320 W. 13th St. 924-4212.)

Short List

JAN HENLE
Sikkema, 530 W. 22nd St. 929-2262.
Through Jan. 6.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

TOLAND GRINNELL
Living out of a suitcase has never looked better than in this cunning installation of self-contained sculpture, a hybrid of Duchamp's *boîte-en-valise* and a high-end picnic hamper. The simplest piece is a portable go-go platform, created by lining the interior of a pigskin trunk with jet-black flooring and wiring it with halogen lights. The most opulent is a pair of his (crocodile) and hers (red leather) luggage, each outfitted with an absurd array of luxury goods, including matching saddles and gold- and silver-plated ponies. Your response to these follies may depend on whether you think Grinnell is satirizing or celebrating the logo life style. Either way, to call it over the top would be an understatement. Through Dec. 30. (Visionaire, 11 Mercer St. 274-8959.)

ARNOLD MESCHES
The third installment of Mesches's familial memoir is a sloppy, passionate history lesson, brimming with images. Coney Island carousel horses and banner headlines compete with family photos and smiling versions of Rita Hayworth. Maps of Europe appear everywhere, with Hitler's invasions marked as strangely beautiful long, branching red arrows. With characteristic candor, Mesches describes the show as his tribute to the man "who fathered him and, probably, the social awareness that he's worn, like a lead yarmulke, all these years." Through Jan. 3. (Donahue Sosinski Art, 560 Broadway. 266-1111.)

Short List

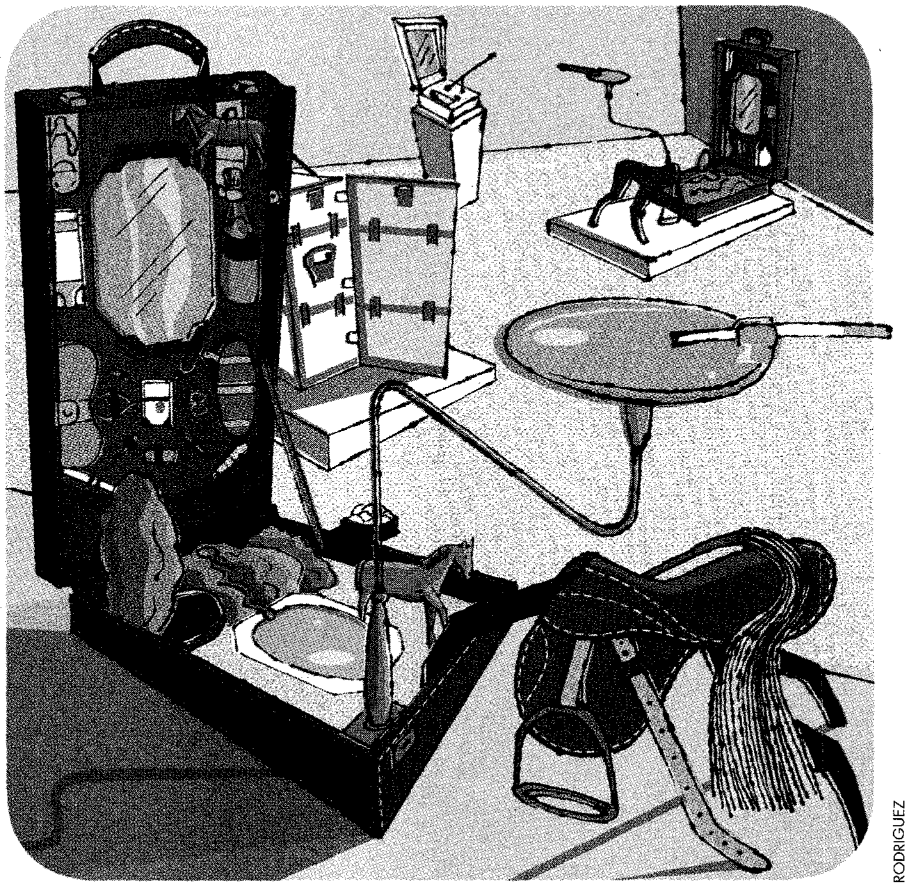
ROBERT MOSKOWITZ
Blum, 99 Wooster St. 343-0441. Through Feb. 3.

ROBERT WILLIAMS
Shafrazi, 119 Wooster St. 274-9300.
Through Jan. 27.

PHOTOGRAPHY

SAMUEL BOURNE
"The Imperial Gaze" chronicles the seven years Bourne spent photographing nineteenth-century India (1863-70), and one hundred years of work from the still-thriving photo agency he started there. Bourne's landscapes, architectural work, and hill-station pictures, which combine both, show his magnificent surroundings oddly unpeopled, as if the valleys and bridges were waiting to receive the next wave of colonists. The agency's work, on the other hand, includes more portraits of locals and visitors. Through Dec. 30. (Sepia, 148 W. 24th St. 645-9444.)

LYNN DAVIS
Davis's large black-and-white architectural photographs isolate the geometry in modern architecture. Her cropped and abstracted subjects, which rarely share the frame with anything more than a



Toland Grinnell's one-of-a-kind de-luxe luggage installations, at Visionaire.

EDEL RODRIGUEZ

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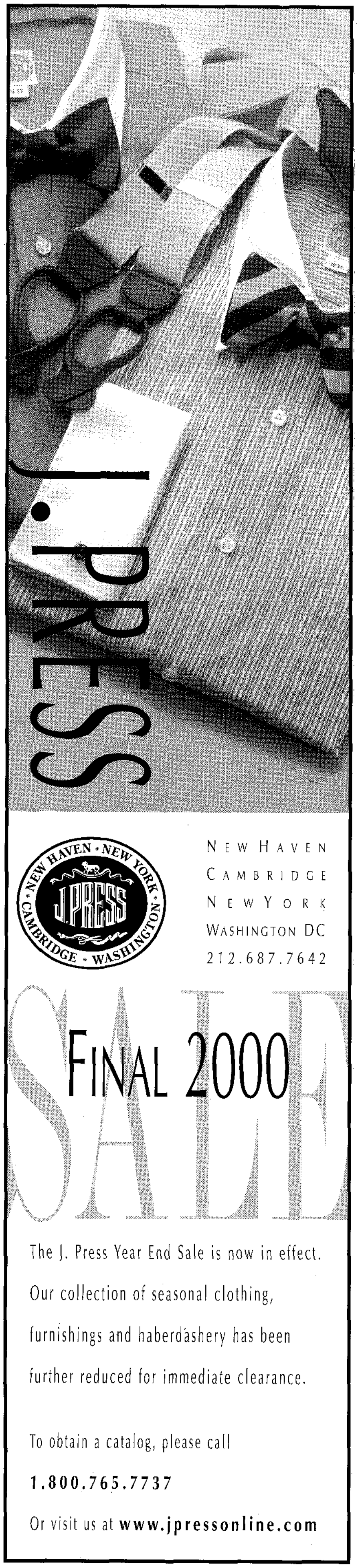
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wide, plain sky, include an abandoned missile site, the Hoover Dam, a Minneapolis Frank Gehry development, and Epcot Center. Through Jan. 13. (Houk, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 750-7070.)

JOHN DUGDALE
For this show, called "Epic of the Starry Heavens," Dugdale has put his royal-blue cyanotypes in cherry-wood frames and hung them on mustard-colored walls below banners stitched with Walt Whitman quotations. The sequences of still-lifes, interiors, and male nudes recall Duane Michaels's earlier homage to Whitman, but the elegant installation makes the experience more intense—it's an aesthetic reverie. Through Jan. 7. (Wessel and O'Connor, 242 W. 26th St. 242-8811.)

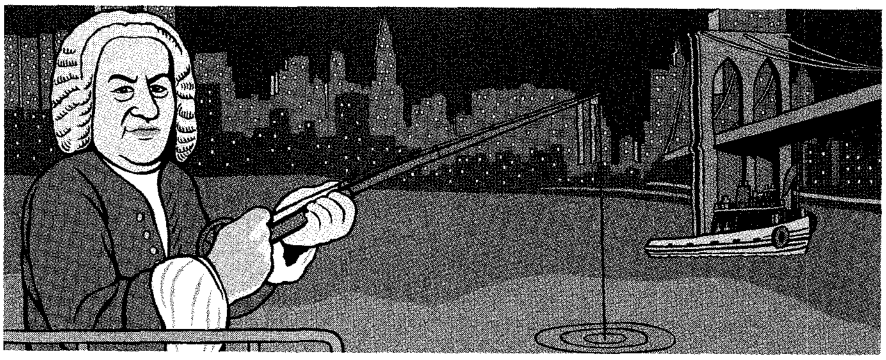
KAREN MÜLLER
Saul, 535 W. 22nd. St. 627-2410. Through Jan. 1.

JASON ODDY
Gallery 24, at 552 W. 24th St. 414-0370. Through Jan. 13.

JACK PIERSON
Cheim & Reed, 521 W. 23rd St. 242-7727. Through Jan. 6.

BEN SHAHN
Greenberg, 120 Wooster St. 334-0010. Through Jan. 20.

See the museum listings for photography exhibitions at the Whitney Museum and the Museum of the City of New York.



Bargemusic, Brooklyn's floating music series, presents Bach's Brandenburg Concertos.

MICHAEL KUPPERMAN

"PARTY PICTURES"
This show, subtitled "From Studio 54 to Cannes 2000," party-hops from Garry Winogrand's vintage black-and-white museum-party prints through Warhol's flash-blinded club-land to the current scene: Larry Fink's fashion-crowd chronicles and Jessica Craig-Martin's merciless charity-circuit exposés will make viewers want to get back in the time machine. But the vanity, misery, and overexposed cleavage that Craig-Martin records (alongside beauty, pleasure, and more flattering dress) are timeless—as is the hope for a satisfying social life, as the artist pointed out recently. "Why do people go to parties? They're all bad. But people get dressed up—they go again and again. It's some kind of strange optimism." Through Jan. 6. (Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren, 730 Fifth Ave. 445-0444.)

"THE PERFECT POSE"
These vintage prints, from the twenties through the forties, are largely the work of photographers for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. Choreographed classics (Martha Graham) and directed clichés (fashion models) are both represented; the middle ground is both more whimsical and more dramatic. The tension in Victor Keppler's 1935 image of Ruth Wallenda, frozen as she works her way across the high wire, pays off, as does the sexiness in an uncredited photograph of Tilly Losch, opening one eye wide in the delicate application of mascara. Through Jan. 13. (Schoormans, 508 W. 26th St. 243-3159.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
I.C.P.'s redesigned midtown space hosts its inaugural round of shows: Annie Leibovitz's "Women," Lorie Novak's "Collected Visions," and a survey of the Center's large permanent collection called "Reflections in a Glass Eye." Uptown, "Eugène Atget: The Pioneer" continues. (Uptown: 1130 Fifth Ave., at 94th St. 860-1777. Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10-5; Fridays, 10-8; Saturdays and Sundays, 10-6. Midtown: 1166 Sixth Ave., at 43rd St. 860-1777. Open Mondays through Wednesdays, 10-5; Thursdays and Fridays, 10-8; Saturdays and Sundays, 10-6.)

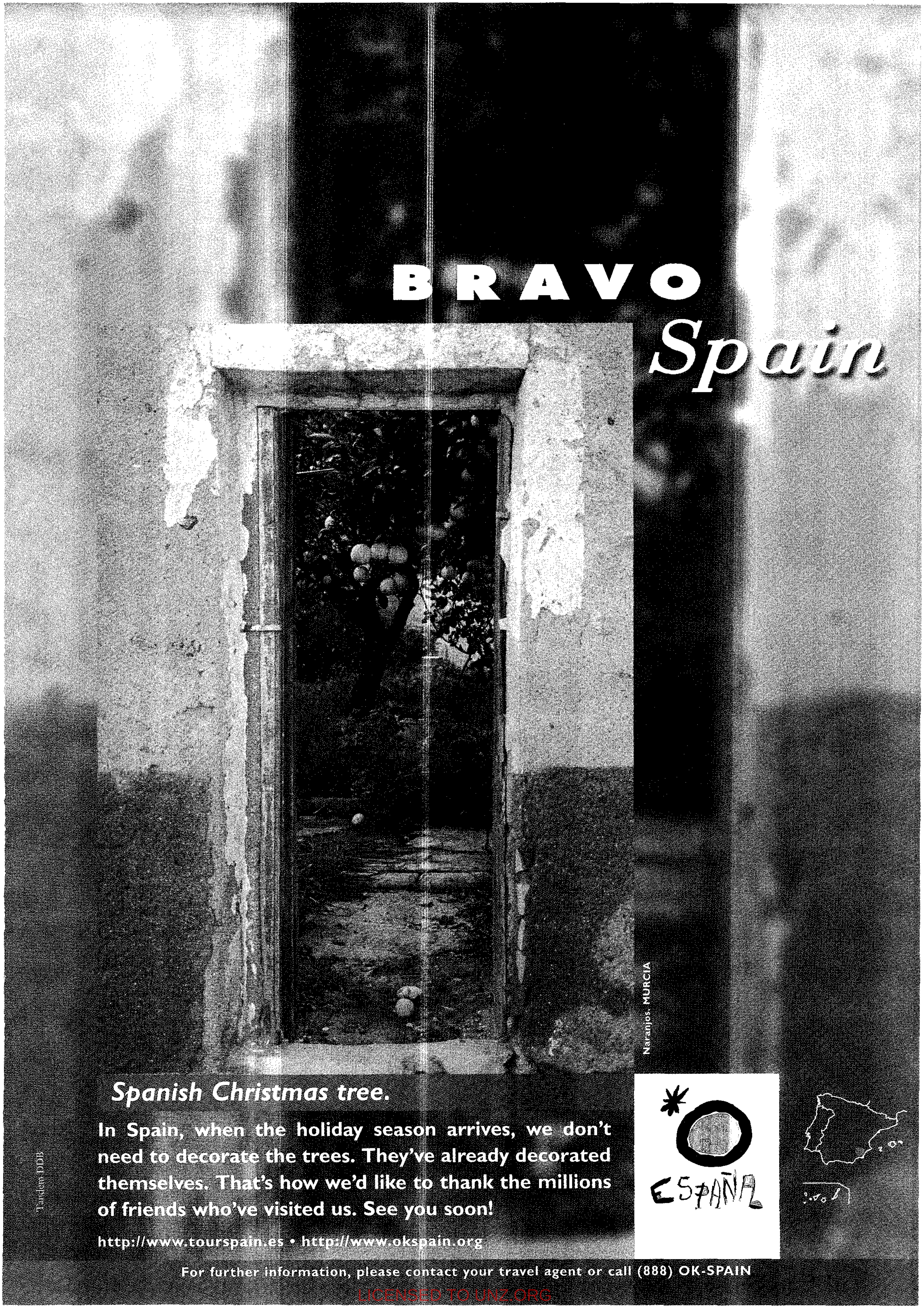
Short List

DAN ESTABROOK
Morthland, 225 Tenth Ave., at 23rd St. Through Dec. 30.

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
The last performance this season of Wagner's **"Der Fliegende Holländer,"** with Sue Patchell, Roland Wagenführer, James Morris, and Jan-Hendrik Rootering; conducted by Valery Gergiev. (Dec. 20 at 8.) ♦ Graham Vick's new production of **"Il Trovatore,"** with its semi-abstract sets and richly colored nineteenth-century-style costumes by Paul Brown, may have been roundly booed on opening night, but it is a refreshing contrast to the Met's conservative previous production. Vick and Brown have plenty of good ideas, even if other innovations—like Neil Shicoff's Manrico entering on a massive cross-turned-runway in the nunnery scene—have got to go. Carlo Rizzi's conducting is another welcome update, smoothly balancing lyricism with efficiency. And the singing is uniformly strong, not only from Shicoff but from Marina Mescheriakova, as Leonora; Roberto Frontali, as the Count; and Dolora Zajick, who brings her laserlike voice and solid characterization to the role of Azucena. (Dec. 21 and Dec. 26 at 8 and Jan. 2 at 8.) ♦ With Sondra Radvanovsky and Barbara Dever replacing Ms. Mescheriakova and Ms. Zajick, and with Fabio Armiliato replacing Mr. Shicoff. (Dec. 29 at 8.) ♦ The company's new production of **"Fidelio,"** with Karita Mattila, Hei-Kyung Hong, Roland Wagenführer, Sergei Leiferkus, René Pape, and James Morris; James Levine. (Dec. 22 at 8 and Dec. 27 at 7:30.) ♦ With Ben Heppner replacing Mr. Wagenführer. (Dec. 30 at 8.) ♦ **"The Merry Widow,"** with Frederica von Stade, Jennifer Welch-Babidge, Håkan Hagegård, Paul Groves, and John Del Carlo; Asher Fisch. In English. (Dec. 23 at 1:30 and Dec. 28 at 7:30.) ♦ **"La Traviata,"** with Ruth Ann Swenson, Marcelo Álvarez, and Dwayne Croft; Jun Märkl. (Dec. 23 at 8 and Dec. 30 at 1:30.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 362-6000.)

AMATO OPERA COMPANY
"La Bohème" is ideal holiday fare, with all those Parisian artist types shivering in their garrets and pining for love. Tickets at the little Amato Opera Theatre are far more modestly priced than those at the Met, making for a manageable family outing, or a good cheap date. (319 Bowery. 228-8200. Dec. 23 at 7:30, Dec. 24 at 2:30, and Dec. 29-30 at 7:30.)



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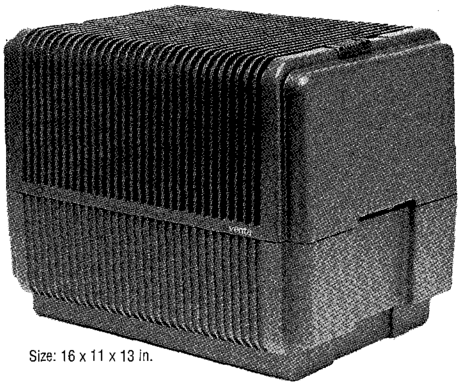

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NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
The Philharmonic began the season with an extensive Mendelssohn festival and will follow it with a month of Schoenberg in the spring, but in the meantime the orchestra is concentrating hard on Brahms, in preparation for its upcoming tour to Spain. The Piano Concerto No. 2 and the Symphony No. 4 are both products of the early eighteen-eighties, the high summer of Brahms's creative life; each is his final attempt at the genre, an exquisite, Shakespearean balance of heroism and tragedy. Elisabeth Leonskaja is the soloist in the concerto; Kurt Masur conducts. (Dec. 28-29 at 8 and Jan. 2 at 7:30.) ♦ Masur and the orchestra celebrate the holiday season with a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, a secular work with its own creed of universal brotherhood. The soloists Donna Brown, Florence Quivar, Stanford Olsen, and Thomas Quasthoff sing the finale, "Ode to Joy," along with the New York Choral Artists and the Boys Choir of Harlem. (Avery Fisher Hall. 721-6500. Dec. 30 at 8.)

"MESSIAH": LAST CALL
Handel's indestructible "entertainment" (in the words of his librettist) on Christian themes takes its final bows for the year; three groups in particular have provided reliable performances for decades. The Musica Sacra Chorus and Orchestra, with conductor Richard Westenberg and a strong team of soloists, mounts the work at Town Hall. (123 W. 43rd St. 307-4100. Dec. 20 at 8.) ♦ The Masterwork Chorus and Orchestra, another New York institution, presents the work at two locations; Andrew Megill, only the third conductor in the group's history, will lead them in "Messiah" for the first time. (Carnegie Hall. 247-7800. Dec. 20 at 8. ♦ Avery Fisher Hall. 721-6500. Dec. 23 at 2.) ♦ The National Chorale and Orchestra, with its longtime conductor, Martin Josman, offers two performances, both at Avery Fisher Hall. (333-5333. Dec. 22-23 at 8.)

"TOO HOT TO HANDEL"
The Concordia Orchestra, a classical group with a jazzy bent, likes to perform a yearly "Gospel Messiah," with Handel's stately arias and choruses laced with the harmonies of black-American music. The composer, who wanted his music to reach as wide an audience as possible, would probably approve. Presented with the Morgan State University Choir, under the direction of Nathan Carter; Marin Alsop conducts. (Avery Fisher Hall. 721-6500. Dec. 21 at 8.)

BARGEMUSIC
The floating music series picks up where the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center left off, taking Bach's Brandenburg Concertos to Brooklyn. Dec. 21 and Dec. 24 at 7:30: Concertos Nos. 2, 4, and 5. ♦ Dec. 28 at 7:30: Concertos Nos. 1, 3, and 6. ♦ Dec. 31 at 7:30: For a New Year's Eve gala, a performance of the complete set. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

KLEZMERFEST
In a family concert, the Klezmer Conservatory Band, acknowledged masters of the genre, perform the Jewish folk music of Eastern Europe. (Avery Fisher Hall. 721-6500. Dec. 24 at 5.)

CHRISTMAS EVE: LESSONS AND CAROLS
A number of the city's Protestant churches carry on this warm and welcoming Anglican tradition—half religious service, half holiday concert—combining Scripture readings of the Christmas story with seasonal music. Admission is free. Dec. 24 at 11 A.M. and 4: The renowned men-and-boys choir of St. Thomas Episcopal Church sings music of Vaughan Williams, David Willcocks, and others, in grand high-church style. (Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. 757-7013.) ♦ Dec. 24 at 5: All Saints Church, another Episcopal parish known for good music, offers its own service of carols, in a less formal style, for both choir and congregation. (230 E. 60th St. 758-0448.) ♦ Dec. 24 at 8: The multi-denominational Riverside Church presents a family service of both traditional and contem-

porary music, with the church's bell ringers joining in the celebrations. (Riverside Dr. at 120th St. 870-6722.)

MONTEVERDI CHOIR / ENGLISH BAROQUE SOLOISTS
At Christmastime last year, the early-music conductor John Eliot Gardiner and his noted early-music colleagues began an ambitious project: to embark on a yearlong "pilgrimage" of Bach's sacred cantatas, to be performed on the dates of the church calendar for which they were designed, at a succession of churches around the world. The journey ends at St. Bartholomew's Church, with three final performances. Dec. 25 at 5: Cantatas Nos. 91, 110, 40, and 121. ♦ Dec. 27 at 7: Nos. 151, 133, 57, and 64. ♦ Dec. 31 at 7: Nos. 152, 122, 28, and 190. (Park Ave. at 50th St. 307-7171.)

ENSEMBLE FOR EARLY MUSIC
The group completes its series of "Renaissance Christmas" concerts, performing carols and noels from the court of Henry VIII. (Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. 280-0330. Dec. 25 at 3 and 8.)

"THE ART OF THE FUGUE"
The harpsichordist Bradley Brookshire and the computer-music specialist James McElwaine have devised a novel presentation of Bach's final masterpiece, with color-coded video projections at the back of the stage highlighting the movement of the contrapuntal lines. (Merkin Hall, 129 W. 67th St. Dec. 31 at 7.)

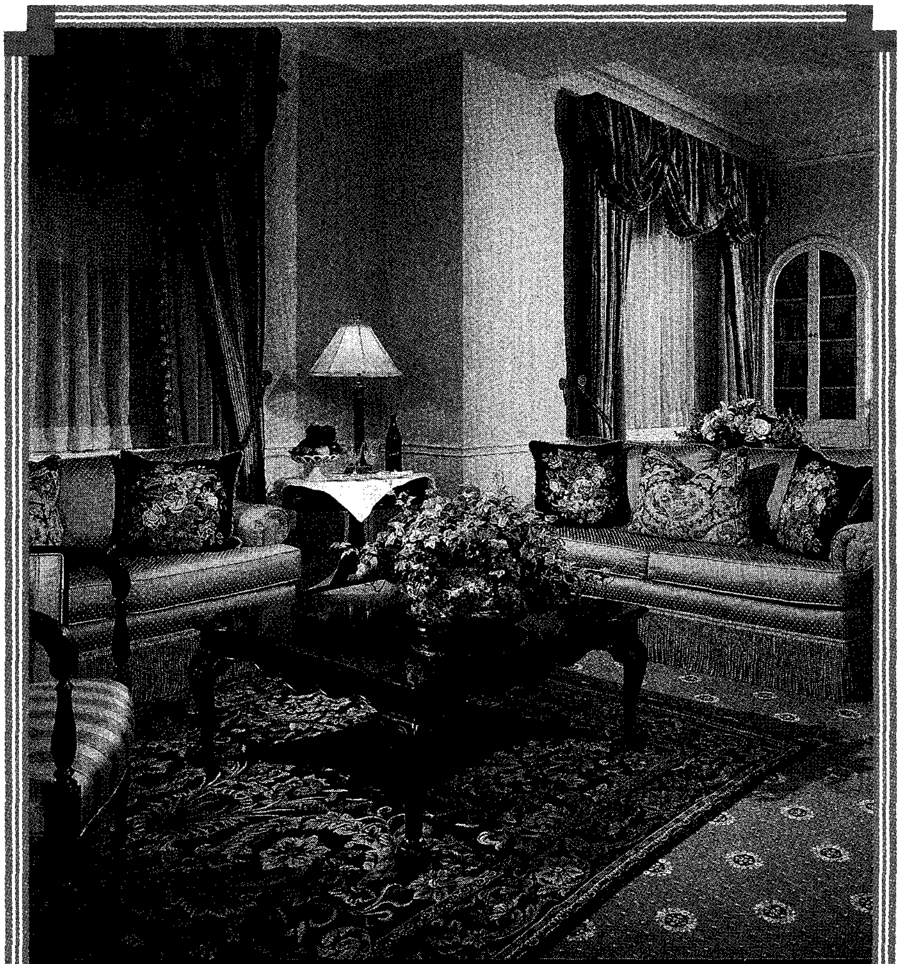
ABOVE AND BEYOND

CLOWNING AROUND
If preparing for holiday parties and dealing with family get-togethers makes you want to run off and join the circus, then you should. This season offers an unprecedented number of choices, from conventional big-tent experiences to far-out alternatives. Barnum's Kaleidoscape, the first one-ring circus in Manhattan from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, features an all-star array of talent, including a juggler from Spain who goes by the name of Picasso and David Larible, the World's Most Lovable Clown. (Bryant Park, Sixth Ave. at 40th St. 877-922-7686. Through Dec. 31.) ♦ The Big Apple Circus, New York City's venerable homegrown troupe, celebrates its twenty-third season with a show titled "Clown Around Town," which is based on the classic kiddie tale of the city mouse and the country mouse. (Damrosch Park, Lincoln Center. 721-6500. Through Jan 7.) ♦ Animal-rights activists and hipsters can rejoice at Circus Oz, a rock-and-roll-flavored Australian affair that has no elephants, lions, or tigers—in fact, no four-legged creatures at all—brought to us by the zany troupe from down under. (The New Victory Theatre, 209 W. 42nd St. 239-6200. Through Jan. 14.)

READINGS
Jan. 1 at 2: More than a hundred and twenty poets, musicians, and dancers, including Patti Smith, Eric Bogosian, John Cale, Jim Carroll, and Penny Arcade, present a New Year's Day marathon reading. (St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie, Second Ave. at 10th St. Tickets at the door.) ♦ Jan. 1 at 4: Late risers can voice their New Year's resolutions during the open-mike portions of the "Alternative New Year's Day Spoken Word/Performance Extravaganza," with more than a hundred and fifty poets and musicians. (CBGB's Lounge, 313 Bowery, at Bleecker St. No tickets necessary.)

TALK
Dec. 25 at 1: At "Klez for Kids," Greg Wall, the leader of the band Klezmerfest, performs a little music and discusses klezmer, the Yiddish language, and other Jewish traditions. (Eldridge Street Synagogue, 12 Eldridge St. 978-8800.)

WALKS
Dec. 23 at 1: Big Onion Walking Tours offers a multiethnic stroll through lower Manhattan. (For more information, call 429-1090.) ♦ Dec. 25 at 11: Transit historian Andrew Sparberg leads a guided tour of the Brooklyn elevated lines. (For more information, call 996-1000.)



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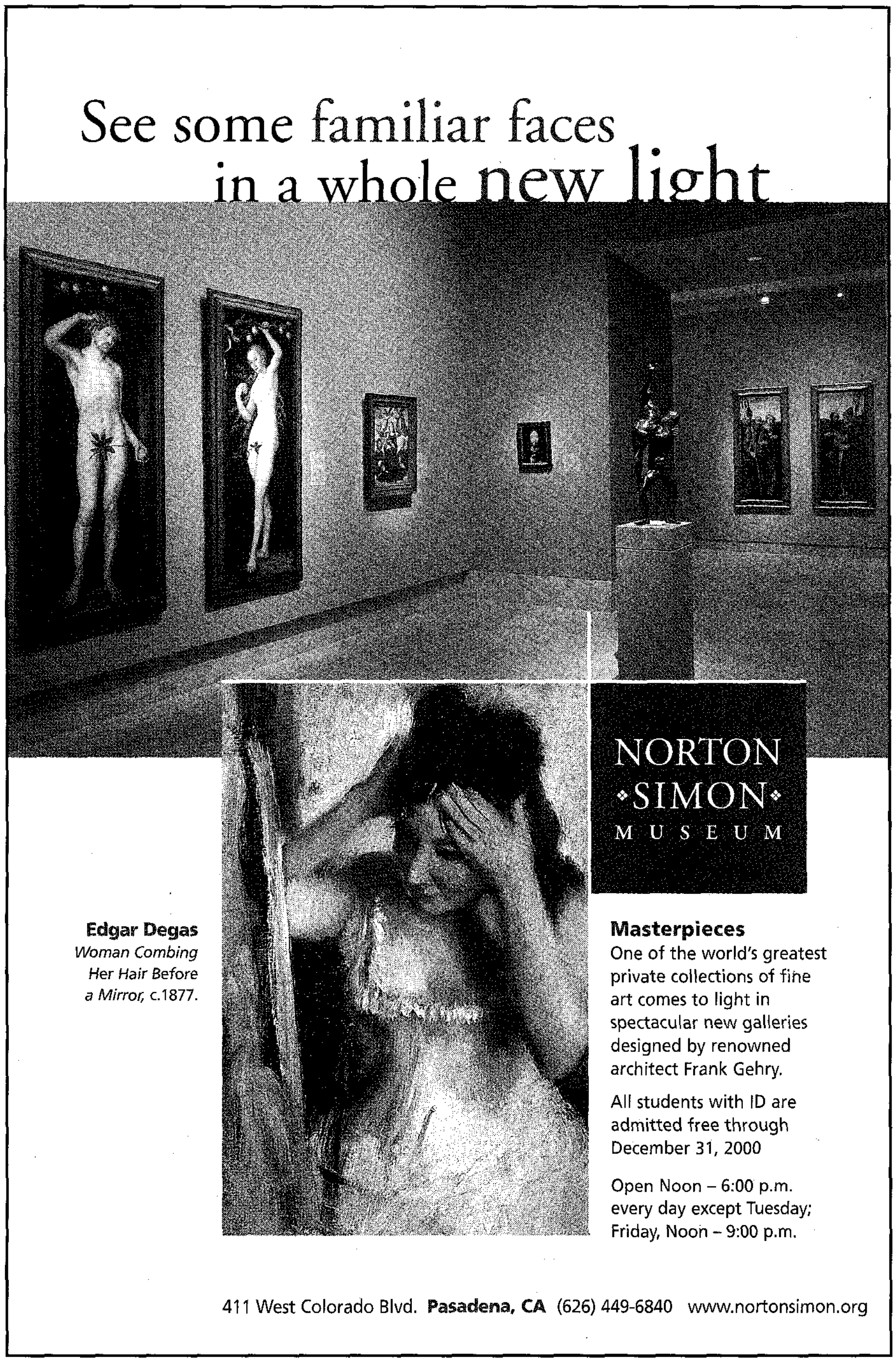

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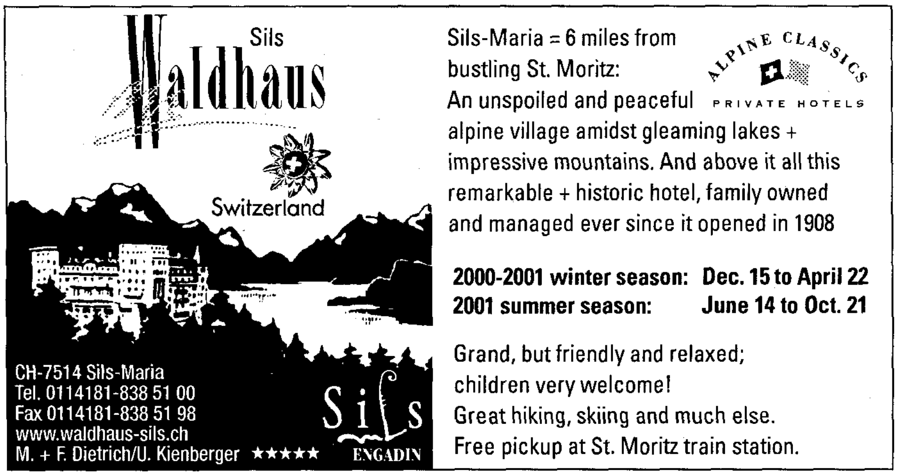

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BOOK CURRENTS

Viva Las Vegas!

"The Strip is supposed to be synonymous with a good-looking female all dressed up in a very expensive diamond-studded evening gown and driving up to a multi-million-dollar hotel in a Rolls-Royce." Such was the vision of Howard Hughes, one of Las Vegas's early tycoons, who bought his first casino on the Strip in 1967. These days, the black-tie set mixes not only with Hawaiian-shirted tourists but with cultural gatekeepers: Steve Wynn's world-renowned art collection is only one example of the new legitimacy of America's own sin city.

For all its recent cachet, though, Vegas may not have abandoned the dark side of its heritage. In the forthcoming **THE MONEY AND THE POWER** (Knopf), Sally Denton and Roger Morris argue that today it isn't gangsters who run the show, but an equally sinister corporate coterie. In fact, Vegas serves as a microcosm for the rest of America, as "the Strip's once disreputable Mob ethic of exploitation and greed has become in large measure a national ethic." In **LICENSE TO STEAL** (Nevada), Jeff Burbank looks at those charged with keeping order in the midst of Vegas's chaos by examining seven representative cases sent before the state gaming authorities, among them that of a casino owner who liked to throw parties on Hitler's birthday which reportedly featured swastika-decorated cakes.

Andrés Martinez offers a gambler's-eye view of the new Vegas in **24/7** (Dell), an account of his high-stakes romp through the casino world—bankrolled with his book publisher's advance. As he careens up and down the Strip, Martinez chats up the locals, including a seasoned bookie down on his luck. Though not thrilled by the "Disneyfication" of Vegas, the gambler acknowledges that it has at least gotten the Mob off his back. "Of course, I'd be off the hook now, anyway," he says ruefully, "being broke and all."

—*William Cohen*

RODNEY ALAN GREENBLATT

Books.

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Missing These Reads Would Be a Crime

THE CONSTANT GARDENER

by John le Carré

The eighteenth novel from the indisputable master of the spy genre is an intricate web of suspicion, betrayal and the consequences of unbridled capitalism. Career diplomat Justin Quayle descends into a labyrinthine world of tragedy and deception when his beautiful young wife is murdered. (Simon & Schuster)

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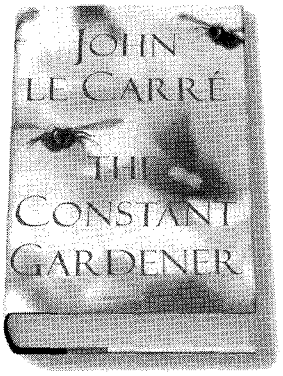

THE KILL ARTIST

by Daniel Silva

To save the Middle East peace process, former Israeli intelligence agent Gabriel Allon reluctantly must engage in a highly personal intercontinental game of cat and mouse with a fanatical madman. The author of *The Mark of the Assassin* has crafted another masterful international thriller. (Random House)

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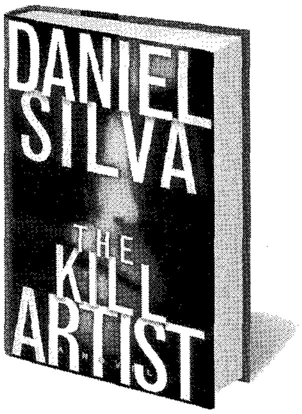

DR. DEATH

by Jonathan Kellerman

Euthanasia advocate Dr. Eldon Mate has been killed with his own suicide machine. To solve this baffling case, LAPD detective Milo Sturgis must once again ask his friend Dr. Alex Delaware for help. This time, however, Alex is faced with a potentially case-destroying conflict of interest. (Random House)

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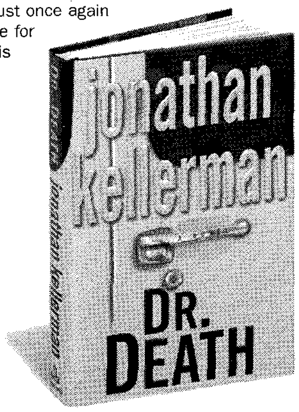

PROTECT AND DEFEND

by Richard North Patterson

The Edgar Award winner and author of the bestsellers *Dark Lady*, *No Safe Place* and *The Final Judgment* presents a stunning new departure, a dramatic and definitive novel that reveals how the judicial system intersects with politics, for better and for worse. (Knopf)

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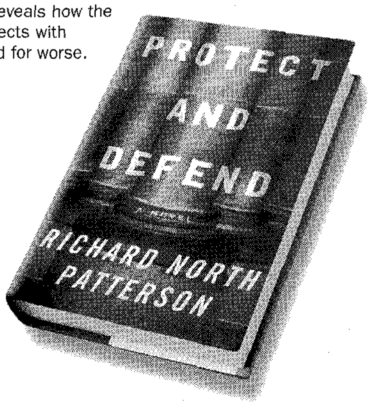

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MOVIES OPENING

ALL THE PRETTY HORSES
A drama about a Texas cowboy (Matt Damon) who rides south into Mexico with his friend (Henry Thomas), looking for work and adventure. Based on Cormac McCarthy's novel. Directed by Billy Bob Thornton. Opening Dec. 25.

BEFORE NIGHT FALLS
A bio-pic about the Cuban novelist and poet Reinaldo Arenas, directed by Julian Schnabel. In Spanish and English. Opening Dec. 22.

BUT FOREVER IN MY MIND
A teen comedy from Italy, written and directed by Gabriele Muccino. In Italian. Opening Dec. 20. (Film Forum.)

CAST AWAY
Reviewed below in Film Notes. Opening Dec. 22.

CHUNHYANG
A romantic drama, set in eighteenth-century Korea and narrated by a *pansori* singer. Directed by Im Kwon Taek. In Korean. Opening Dec. 29. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

DRACULA 2000
An updating of the classic horror story. Patrick Lussier is the director; Wes Craven is the producer. Opening Dec. 25.

AN EVERLASTING PIECE
Barry Levinson directed this comedic drama about two barbers, one Catholic (Barry McEvoy) and one Protestant (Brian O'Bryne), who sell toupees in Northern Ireland. Opening Dec. 25.

THE FAMILY MAN
Nicolas Cage plays a stockbroker who wakes up one morning with a wife, children, and a house in the suburbs. Directed by Brett Ratner. Opening Dec. 22.

FINDING FORRESTER
A reclusive novelist (Sean Connery) mentors a young basketball star and writer (Robert Brown) in this drama directed by Gus Van Sant. Opening Dec. 19.

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 22.

MALÈNA
Reviewed below in Film Notes. Opening Dec. 25.

MISS CONGENIALITY
Sandra Bullock plays an F.B.I. agent who goes undercover in a Texas beauty pageant, in this comedy directed by Donald Petrie. With Michael Caine and Candice Bergen. Opening Dec. 22.

MR. RICE'S SECRET
A fantasy fable, with David Bowie as a mysterious neighbor who helps an ailing teen-ager. Directed by Nicholas Kendall. Opening Dec. 22. (Pioneer.)

O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 22.

SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE
The story of the filming of "Nosferatu," with John Malkovich as the director F. W. Murnau, and Willem Dafoe as Max Schreck, the actor who played the vampire. Directed by E. Elias Merhige. Opening Dec. 29.

STATE AND MAIN
David Mamet wrote and directed this satire about a film-production crew that takes over a small town. With Sarah Jessica Parker, Julia Stiles, Alec Baldwin, and Philip Seymour Hoffman. Opening Dec. 22.

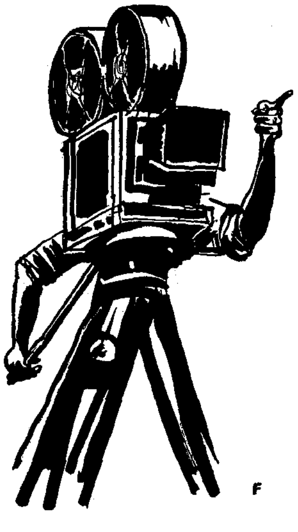
THIRTEEN DAYS
Reviewed below in Film Notes. Opening Dec. 25.

TRAFFIC
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 27.

VATEL
A period drama centered around a three-day feast for Louis XIV, directed by Roland Joffé. With Gerard Dépardieu, Tim Roth, and Uma Thurman. Opening Dec. 25.

FILM NOTES

BEST IN SHOW
Christopher Guest reunites much of the cast of "Waiting for Guffman" for another mock documentary; the target this time around is the cloistered world of championship-dog breeding. Guest directs and scripts with a loose, improvisational style (no dialogue was written down), and while some of the scenes glide along with a quick-witted tempo, others are awkward. Best-in-group awards go to Parker Posey and Michael Hitchcock as an uptight suburban couple whose courtship involved adjacent Starbucks franchises, John Michael Higgins as a preening owner who outshines his Shih Tzu, and Fred Willard as a chipper commentator who showers asinine comments on the proceedings. If Guest has a trademark style, it's the airtight earnestness he demands of his cast—there's not one wink in the entire film.—*Michael Agger* (Battery Park 16, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, New York Twin, 19th Street East 6, and The Screening Room.)



BILLY ELLIOT
The British director Stephen Daldry has previously concentrated on theatre; now, as if to prove that he's a man for all art forms, he's made a film about ballet. Billy Elliot (Jamie Bell) is a slim, pugnacious boy who doesn't enjoy his boxing lessons but casts a jealous glance at the dance class that rehearses nearby. He joins in, prospers, gets some private tuition from his careworn teacher (Julie Walters), and ends up auditioning for the Royal Ballet. Will he make it? Can you guess? Although the film is set during the miners' strike of 1984 (the most grievous strife in Britain's recent history), it slowly sheds its anger and abrasive comedy in favor of something softer. The best thing on view is Bell, whose ratty, unsentimental demeanor just about sees the story through.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 10/30/00.) (Angelika Film Center, BAM Rose Cinemas, Cinema II, and Lincoln Square.)

BOUNCE
It doesn't. Ben Affleck plays a callous Los Angeles ad salesman; Gwyneth Paltrow is a young widow; each has reasons to feel guilty about starting a love affair, but the affair happens nonetheless. After some initial comic awkwardness, which is entertaining, the movie slips into trite predictability. Poor Affleck has to be humbled—he gets to eat crow even before he's established himself onscreen as a cad. Written and directed by Don Roos, who did far far better with his 1998 comedy, "The Opposite of Sex."—*David Denby* (12/4/00) (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, Gotham Cinema, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, and Union Square.)

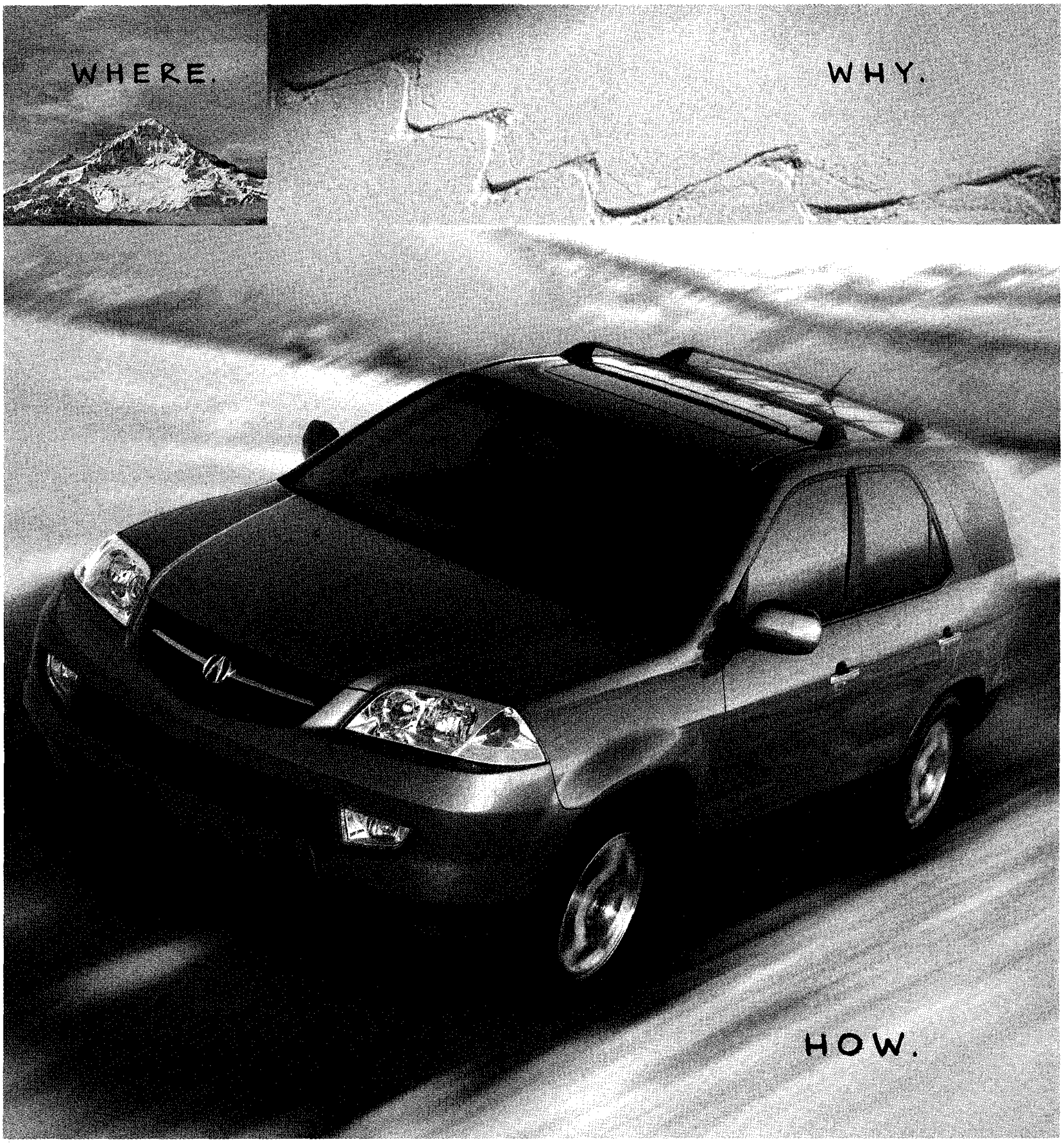
LA BÛCHE
Paris at Christmas, the time of torture: a family whose members don't much like one another plans to gather for a celebratory dinner. As they meet in pairs and trios, we discover crosscurrents of relationships and betrayals, and the movie turns into an intricate puzzle that comes together in the viewer's head. Danièle Thompson wrote the film with her son Christopher Thompson, and also directed. Her work, at times, has a startling candor, as well as the typical French virtue of companionability. The attractive cast includes Claude Rich and Françoise Fabian as the divorced father and mother, and Sabine Azéma, Emmanuelle Béart, and Charlotte Gainsbourg as the daughters. The French economy may be faltering, but from the evidence of this movie the country's fascination with adultery has only increased. In French.—*D.D.* (Paris.)

CAST AWAY
Tom Hanks, a cheerful, bullying American efficiency expert—he works for FedEx, squeezing time out of delivery systems—finds himself with nothing but time on his hands after his airplane crashes and he's left stranded on a desert island. The greatest thing about this old-fashioned adventure film is its extraordinary physical detail—for a good three-quarters of an hour Hanks doesn't say a word as he re-creates the elements of civilization, learning to make a fire out of sticks, drawing on cave walls, and fashioning a weird totem out of a volleyball that washes ashore. The director, Robert Zemeckis, and the screenwriter, William Broyles, Jr., attend to such things as the peculiar noise that the wind makes in a cave and the moaning singsong of a whale just before it surfaces. The movie dissolves irony: as much as possible it brings us back to the essence of our physical existence. It's the best Robinson Crusoe picture ever made. With Helen Hunt as Hanks's girlfriend back in Memphis.—*D.D.* (12/18/00) (Battery Park 16, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, and Village Theatre VII.)

CHARLIE'S ANGELS
It's the usual story: hitch a couple of electrodes to an old TV show, flick the switch, and hope that it comes surging back to life. This latest effort can't be faulted for energy, but in most other respects it barely gives a twitch. The Angels are played by Lucy Liu, Drew Barrymore, and, most engagingly, Cameron Diaz. The plot entails satellites, cell phones, and a threat to "world privacy"—not, one might suppose, a profound cause of anxiety for our flamboyant heroines. The director is someone, or something, called McG, and he, or it, seems content to bundle one high-kicking, high-volume scene on top of the next. You can't hear yourself think, which is probably a good thing.—*A.L.* (11/13/00) (Battery Park 16, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, and Village Theatre VII.)

CHOCOLAT
A confectionary fairy tale, photographed in pale-lemon winter light. In France, in 1960, a beautiful and charming woman (Juliette Binoche) and her little girl (Victoire Thivisol) waft into a small town, open a *chocolaterie*, and provide the unhappy and repressed inhabitants with exactly the kind of bonbons they need to make their troubles go away (the chocolate, laced with an old Mayan powder, acts as an all-purpose elixir). This inspires the hostility of the town's impotent deity, the Comte de Reynaud (Alfred Molina), who rallies the forces of reaction. Lasse Hallström's production is yet another complacent movie about the free spirits versus the squares; this one commends the audience for favoring such dangerous things as eating, dancing, friendship, sex, and riverboats. Judi Dench, as a grouchy old lady, transcends the syrup. With Lena Olin, Peter Stormare, and Johnny Depp as some sort of Irish river rat who fixes doors, plays the guitar, and ever so gently seduces the heroine. In English.—*D.D.* (Angelika Film Center, Cinema I, and Lincoln Square.)

CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON
The new Ang Lee film is scripted in Chinese and set in the China of the early nineteenth century, although we could be watching a fable from any time in the last millennium, or from no time at all. Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh), probably the least excitable action heroine in modern movies, is given a sword by Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun Fat), for safekeeping. Needless to say, it is soon stolen, and the hunt is on. When pursuing a likely suspect, Mu Bai and Shu Lien tend to take the quickest route, whether it's up a wall, over a roof, across a lake, or, best of all, from tree to tree. They don't fly so



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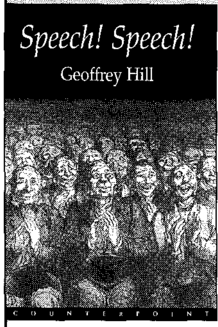

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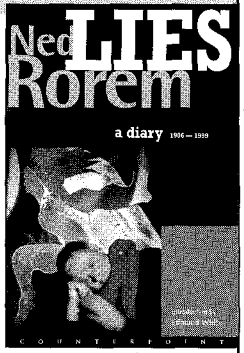

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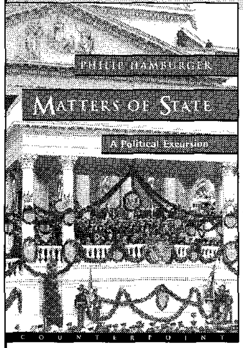

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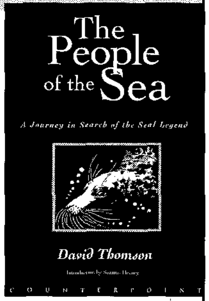

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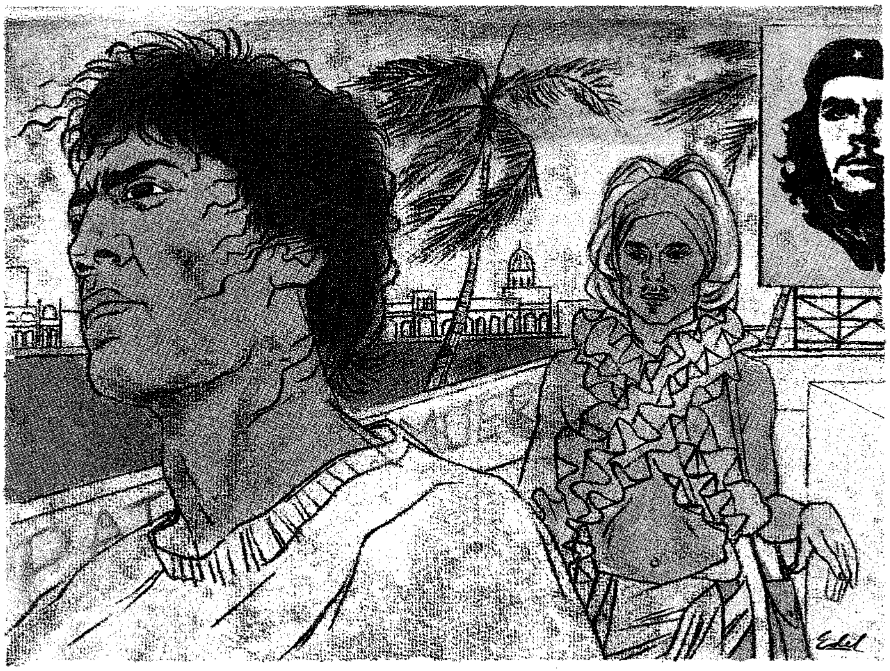
much as dance through the air, taking fairy-tale strides. (The shoot involved plenty of wirework, all of it erased in postproduction.) The film is alive with fighting, yet it does not feel violent. Athletic honors are shared between Yeoh and Zhang Ziyi, who plays a rebellious young noblewoman with a fiery past. The outright winner is Ang Lee, who is at once dependably stylish and smartly unpredictable. Where will he turn his talents next?—*A.L.* (12/11/00) (Angelika Film Center, Chelsea Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and 64th and 2nd.)

THE GRINCH

A bold, not to say foolhardy, attempt to film Dr. Seuss. Jim Carrey plays the Grinch, a crabby, green-faced sluggard who lives at the top of Mt. Crumpit. He is consumed with loathing for the Whos, the cute race that lives in the valley below, and you can see his point: some of them are so doggedly joyous that they ought, at the very least, to be locked up. The director is Ron Howard, in a whimsical vein; the screen is so crammed with candy-colored detail that you come out feeling slightly sick, though children with a sweet tooth may succumb. The news that the Grinch is not really mean but simply misunderstood is no surprise, but it still spells doom for the movie. With Jeffrey Tambor and, hunting hard for laughs, Christine Baranski.—*A.L.* (11/27/00) (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Olympia I and II, Orpheum VII, 72nd Street East, and Union Square.)



"Before Night Falls," a bio-pic about Reinaldo Arenas, directed by Julian Schnabel.

A HARD DAY'S NIGHT

A satiric celebration of anarchic youth and the blast of oxygen they give a wheezing kingdom. The director, Richard Lester, and the screenwriter, Alun Owen, set out, in 1964, to show how the Beatles' phenomenal fame encased them in a cocoon. But the Fab Four aren't larvae—they're brilliant butterflies, and they have an unsurpassed rapport with their fans, whether in the streets of London or in a movie theatre. Lester directs fearlessly, shooting them every which way to capture their antic verve. The nonchalant iconoclast John Lennon "snorts" a Coke bottle; Paul McCartney, in a bowler hat and fake beard, clowns like an aristocratic elf. Ringo Starr becomes the group's hangdog mascot, George Harrison its pocket of moodiness. Lester devised strategies for making visual poetry out of rock which music-video directors have been stealing for decades. In one of the most glorious musical numbers in movie history, the Beatles break out of their keepers' care and zigzag through a field to the tune of "Can't Buy Me Love."—*Michael Sragow* (Film Forum.)

MALÈNA

Giuseppe Tornatore's wartime fable about a beautiful young woman (Monica Bellucci) and her teenage secret admirer (Giuseppe Sulfaro) in a small, gossip-hungry Sicilian town. The elements of the story—the love-smitten boy, the lustful townsmen, the resentful wives—could have been made into a treacly fiasco. Instead, Tornatore has fashioned a dreamy-looking epic. The movie is playful (most of the time), and the drama of the war's effect on the town is appropriately stirring. But Tornatore's real coup, beyond the gorgeous camerawork (married to a lovely score by Ennio Morricone), is the way he has photographed his star, Monica Bellucci, with all the ripeness and sensuality of a latter-day Ava Gardner. She is stunningly incarnate.—*Bruce Diones* (Angelika Film Center and Cinema I.)

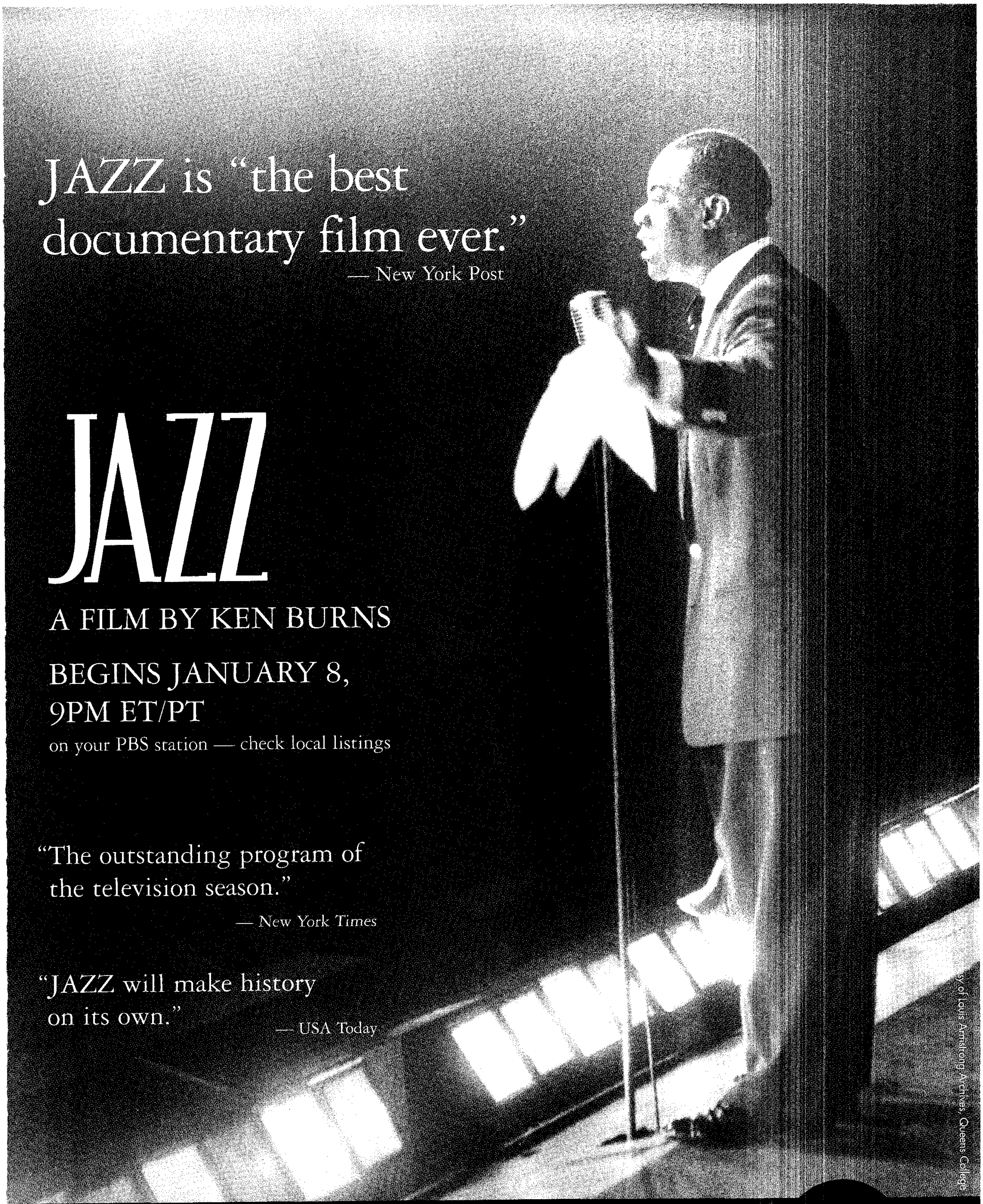
MEET THE PARENTS

Jay Roach moves on from the campy delights of the Austin Powers series to direct this smoothly acted comedy of errors. Ben Stiller plays a modern man charged with a Victorian task: asking his girlfriend's father for permission to marry her. With a calamitous surname ("pronounced just like it's spelled, F-O-C-K-E-R") and a faintly hilarious profession (male nurse), Stiller seems like a sitting duck for the secretive, overprotective father, played by Robert De Niro. Stiller grovels, De Niro growls, and the girls (Blythe Danner and Teri Polo) watch from the sidelines. This is dumbed-up comedy: there are just enough unexpected moments to redeem all the easy pleasures of the slapstick.—*M.A.* (Battery Park 16, First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Cinema 1 and 2, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, and Village Theatre VII.)

MEN OF HONOR

Robert De Niro's bizarre performance as a choleric Navy diver—spasmodic body movement and an out-of-the-swamp Southern accent—is the only genuine life in this exceptionally square military biography. An earnest Cuba Gooding, Jr., plays the real-life hero Carl Brashear, who overcame racist hazing to become the Navy's first black master diver, in the nineteen-fifties. De Niro is the instructor who initially tries to discourage Brashear and then becomes his champion. Familiar as it may be, the story has stirring moments, although the screenwriter, Scott Marshall Smith, and the director, George Tillman, Jr., do their best to kill them. Each scene shows the hero facing some Challenge, which

EDEL RODRIGUEZ



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he sternly Confronts and then Overcomes.—*D.D.* (11/20/00) (Battery Park 16, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Murray Hill Cinemas, Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 62nd & Broadway, Village East Cinemas, and Ziegfeld.)

THE MYSTERY OF PICASSO

Picasso and Henri-Georges Clouzot ("The Wages of Fear," "Diabolique") collaborate. The result is one of the most joyful of all records of an artist at work. Picasso has a volatile, explosive presence. He seems to take art back to an earlier function, before the centuries of museums and masterpieces; he is the artist as clown, as conjurer, as master funmaker. For most of this 1956 film the screen is his paper or canvas, and in seventy-five minutes he draws or paints fifteen pictures. When he complains to Clouzot that the canvas is too small, the screen expands to CinemaScope size. (Don't be put off by the fatuous narrator who tells us that we will see what is in the mind of a genius at work, and exclaims, "We would give much to know what was in Joyce's mind while he was writing 'Ulysses'!") In French.—*Pauline Kael* (Film Forum; Dec. 29-Jan. 2.)

MON ONCLE

One often appreciates what Jacques Tati is trying to do more than what he actually brings off. His target in this 1958 film is the depersonalization of modern life—not so much the mechanization that René Claire satirized in "À Nous la Liberté" and Chaplin in "Modern Times," but the sterile, tasteless tedium that modern hygienic design has produced. There are genuinely inventive moments: the little boys gambling on whether passersby will fall into their lamppost trap; the old man directing a chauffeur who is trying to park an inordinately long car; the willful garage doors; the wonderful use of the modern functional house as a cartooned face, so that heads at the circular windows become eyes looking out. But the moments are intermittent, and a fundamental miscasting confuses the issue: shouldn't the unemotional, gawky, butterfingered Tati be playing the plastics manufacturer rather than the warm, friendly uncle? In French.—*P.K.* (American Museum of the Moving Image; Dec. 23, Dec. 26-27, and Dec. 30.)

PROOF OF LIFE

A competent, entertaining, but uninspired large-scale thriller about an idealistic engineer (David Morse) who gets kidnapped for ransom by drug guerrillas in South America. His wife (Meg Ryan), abandoned and helpless in an infinitely corruptible country, attracts the loyalty of a roughneck (Russell Crowe) who works as a negotiator and rescuer for insurance companies. The outlines of the plot have been lifted from "Casablanca": the shrewd tough guy who seems to be out only for himself sacrifices his desires and delivers the noble booby of a husband back to his wife. Crowe has charisma, physical prowess, and sexual authority; Meg Ryan just seems petulant. Despite reports of an on-the-set romance between them, they don't deliver much heat. The purple clouds and thick green forest canopy of Ecuador, where the movie was shot, look great. With a fine performance by David Caruso as a fellow-roughneck. Taylor Hackford directed.—*D.D.* (Battery Park 16, Chelsea West, Coronet Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Cinema 1 and 2, Orpheum VII, and Union Square.)

QUILLS

Philip Kaufman turns eagerly back to sex, a topic that he has merely brushed against in the years since "Henry and June." Geoffrey Rush plays the Marquis de Sade, imprisoned in a lunatic asylum but determined to continue writing—and, if possible, publishing—his scurrilous works. He is befriended and, for a while, tolerated by the Abbé Coulmier (Joaquin Phoenix), the priest in charge; the regime darkens with the arrival of Dr. Royer-Collard (Michael Caine), who is under orders to block de Sade's creative juices. Add the ripe presence of a willing laundress (Kate Winslet), who smuggles out the manuscripts, and the stage is set: what for, it is never quite clear. The movie declines into a drab, cloistered hymn to freedom of speech, and Kaufman's directing of period frenzy is surprisingly leaden; rising above it is Rush, alternately cooing and blustery, and almost certainly preferable to the real Marquis.—*A.L.* (11/27/00) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

REQUIEM FOR A DREAM

Darren Aronofsky's new film stars Ellen Burstyn as Sara Goldfarb, a Brighton Beach widow who launches herself on a crash diet—a path that will lead to pill addiction and electroshock therapy. Meanwhile, her son Harry (Jared Leto) and his girlfriend, Marion (Jennifer Connelly), yield to the pull of hard drugs. Aronofsky divides them by split screen, and punches home their addictions with a blistering montage of pills, puffs, and dilating eyes. All this is managed with formidable skill, but it shuts the movie down, and the various junkies—even Burstyn, who gives the role everything she's got—end up looking less substantial than their respective poisons.—*A.L.* (10/9/00) (Union Square.)

SPRING FORWARD

Men without women. A young ex-convict (Liev Schreiber) takes refuge in a scenic New England town, where he gets a Parks Department job and a mentor in the form of a wise old man (Ned Beatty). They talk to each other the way men do only in movies, with complete sentences and neat, instructive anecdotes. Beatty teaches Schreiber what it means to be responsible, and Schreiber turns Beatty on to marijuana and an appreciation of the infinite. This mixture of Robert Bly and Raymond Carver may be too musky an aroma for all but the most sensitive of the species. Tom Gilroy wrote and directed; the acoustic-guitar soundtrack gives the film the feel of an extended James Taylor song.—*M.A.* (Cinema Village, 59th Street East Cinema, and First & 62nd Cinemas.)

THIRTEEN DAYS

The Cuban Missile Crisis once again, told this time through the eyes of Kenny O'Donnell (Kevin Costner), the outspoken yet loyal Boston-Irish pol who wound up as special assistant to President Kennedy in the White House. As always, the story is engrossing and frightening, and it's salutary to be reminded how close we came to nuclear war with the Soviets in 1962. The American military leaders—who tried to pressure Kennedy into immediately bombing the missile sites in Cuba—come off as reckless, the Kennedy clan as cool and resourceful. Unfortunately, most of the actors, wrestling with their regional accents, lack stature, and the staging is generally stiff and unconvincing. Written by David Self; directed by Roger Donaldson. The stock footage of nuclear explosions is alarmingly beautiful. —*D.D.* (Empire 25, Cinema I, Lincoln Square, and Village Theatre VII.)

A TIME FOR DRUNKEN HORSES

The Northern Iran winters are so cold that the Kurdish smugglers who live there feed their mules alcohol so that they will carry loads over the mountain passes. In this world of high-risk border crossings and death by land mine, a fatherless young boy named Ayoub scrapes out a living doing odd tasks, supporting his sisters and crippled brother. The director Bahman Ghobadi's affection for his subjects gives the film a certain lightness. He takes the raw materials of his homeland—the harsh landscape, communal rooms, and lambent-eyed children—and fashions a visual poem. Ghobadi documents all this without intruding, and the results are quietly enthralling. In Kurdish.—*M.A.* (Cinema Village and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

UNBREAKABLE

Another sombre, accomplished Philadelphia story from M. Night Shyamalan, the writer and director of "The Sixth Sense." A smirkless and bald Bruce Willis plays a melancholy football-stadium guard who hides his inborn supernatural powers. Samuel L. Jackson, with a mass of Little Richard hair, is an irascible devotee of comic-book art who suffers from osteogenesis imperfecta; his bones crumble easily, and he's always taking spills and getting broken into pieces. He pursues Willis through the cheerless blue-gray city and tries to convince him that he must act like a superhero in the comics. Somehow this will redeem Jackson, an unhappy man who's physically incapable of doing anything

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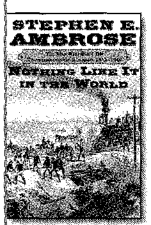

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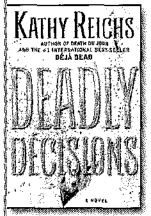
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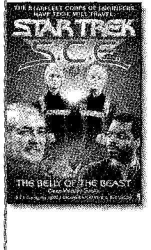

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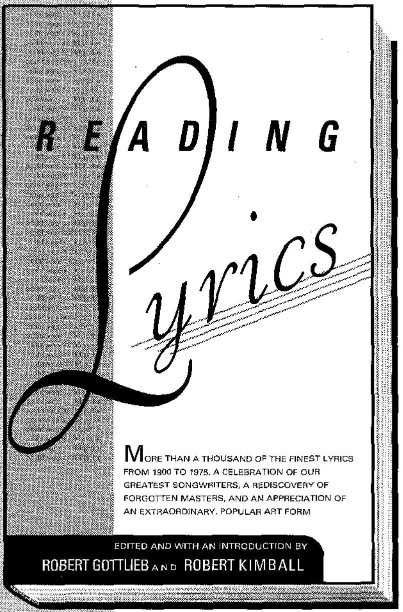
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at all. Jackson succeeds, but far too late in the movie, and there's no joy or liberation in Willis's sudden aggression. The fantasy never makes much sense (what *is* Willis supposed to do for Jackson?), but the picture is impressively controlled—slow-moving, morose, frightening, hushed.—*D.D.* (12/4/00) (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, Cinema 3rd Avenue, 84th Street Sixplex, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Olympia I and II, Orpheum VII, Union Square, and Waverly.)

VERTICAL LIMIT
It's hard to tell if the special effects in this high-altitude thriller are just plain bad or an intentional homage to the clunky pre-digital productions of the mid-eighties—even the eagle in the opening scene looks fake. The cherub-faced Chris O'Donnell climbs a mountain to rescue his sister, and along the way there are plenty of vertiginous frights as well as some truly scary acting. The movie's immaculate disregard of logic and gravity becomes a source of mirth, both in the theatre and afterward.—*M.A.* (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, Union Square, and Waverly.)

WHAT WOMEN WANT
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (Battery Park 16, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Cinema 1 and 2, New York Twin, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, and Village Theatre VII.)

THE YARDS
A lowering, heavy-browed thriller from the director James Gray, who made a name for himself with "Little Odessa." In many ways, this is more of the same: a tight and sometimes tortured community, the sober settling of scores, and what feels like an official rationing of daylight. Mark Wahlberg plays Leo, who's trying to go straight; he takes a job as sidekick to his old friend Willie (Joaquin Phoenix), who fixes contracts for the New York subway system. Things go well, then badly, then worse still, until Leo is dwelling in subterranean solitude—Gray's kind of place. The supporting cast is tough and tested: Faye Dunaway, Ellen Burstyn, and especially James Caan, who plays Leo's uncle by marriage. The film may be humorless, unflustered by the need to quicken or amuse, but it feels unfashionably true to itself. Gray has reconstructed a world that he knows, and conjured a mood that no one else would have the nerve to maintain.—*A.L.* (10/30/00) (Murray Hill Cinemas.)

YOU CAN COUNT ON ME
The first-rate actress Laura Linney—bland on the surface but with angry impulses churning underneath—gives a detailed and involving performance as a single working mother in a small and somewhat boring upstate New York town. When her screwup of a kid brother (Mark Ruffalo) returns from Alaska, she's torn between tossing him out and letting him stay on and become a companion to her fatherless son (Rory Culkin). The movie was written and directed by the playwright and screenwriter Kenneth Lonergan, who pays close attention to the way so many of us are divided between good and bad impulses—including bad impulses we desperately need to act on if we're not going to feel half-dead. Lonergan's work is quiet but intense, and Ruffalo—dark and sensual and agonizingly confused—gives a heartbreaking performance. With Matthew Broderick and Jon Tenney as Linney's suitors.—*D.D.* (12/18/00) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Square, and Village East Cinemas.)

ALSO PLAYING

ALMOST FAMOUS (9/18/00)
Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, and Murray Hill Cinemas.

THE CONTENDER (10/16 & 10/23/00)
Beekman.

DANCER IN THE DARK (9/25/00)
Union Square.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS
Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Sutton 1 and 2, and Village East Cinemas.

DUDE, WHERE'S MY CAR?
Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Murray Hill Cinemas, Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 62nd & Broadway, and Village East Cinemas.

THE EMPEROR'S NEW GROOVE
Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, and Village Theatre VII.

ERIN BROCKOVICH (3/27/00)
Empire 25.

POLLOCK
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.

THE 6TH DAY (11/20/00)
Battery Park 16, 84th Street Sixplex, First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, and Union Square.

WONDER BOYS (2/21/00)
Empire 25, Lincoln Square, and Village Theatre VII.

THEATRE ADDRESSES

Unless noted, call 777-FILM for show times.

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.
BAM Rose Cinemas, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-623-2770).
Battery Park 16, West St. at Vesey St. (945-3418).
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinema I, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema II, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema 3rd Avenue, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (924-3363).
Coronet Cinemas, Third Ave. at 59th St.
East 85th Street, First Ave. at 85th St.
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
Empire 25, on 42nd St. near Eighth Ave. (398-3939).
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
Gotham Cinema, Third Ave. at 58th St.
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St.
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Cinema 1 and 2, Broadway at 99th St.
Murray Hill Cinemas, 160 E. 34th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 67th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Olympia I and II, Broadway at 107th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (688-3800).
Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 125 E. 86th St.
Pioneer, 155 E. 3rd St. (254-3300).
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
The Screening Room, 54 Varick St. (334-2100).
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
State, Broadway at 45th St.
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center (875-5600).
Waverly 1 and 2, Sixth Ave. at 3rd St.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—Through Dec. 31: A Jacques Tati retrospective. All films are in French. Dec. 23 at 2, Dec. 26-27 at 2, and Dec. 30 at 4:15: "Mon Oncle" (†). ♦ Dec. 23 at 4:15 and Dec. 31 at 2: "Traffic" (1971). ♦ Dec. 24 at 2: "Parade" (1973). ♦ Dec. 28-29 at 2: "Mr. Hulot's Holiday" (1953). ♦ Dec. 30 at 2: "Jour de Fête" (1948). ♦ Classic movies. Dec. 23 and Dec. 30 at 6:30: "Fanny and Alexander" (1982, Ingmar Bergman; in Swedish.)

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-623-2770)—Dec. 20 at 7:30: "Diary of a Lost Girl" (1929, George Wilhelm Pabst). ♦ Dec. 21 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "Tom Jones" (1963, Tony Richardson). ♦ Dec. 22-23 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "The Wizard of Oz" (1939, Victor Fleming). ♦ Dec. 24-25 at 2, 3:45, 5:30, 7:15, and 9: "The Nightmare Before Christmas" (1993, Henry Selick). ♦ Dec. 26-27 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "Sunset Boulevard" (1950, Billy Wilder). ♦ Dec. 28-29 at 7: "Gone with the Wind" (1939, Fleming). ♦ Dec. 30-31 at 2, 3:50, 5:40, 7:30, and 9:20: "South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut" (1999, Trey Parker).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110)—Dec. 22-28 at 1:30, 4:15, 7, and 9:30: A new 3-D print of "Miss Sadie Thompson" (1953, Curtis Bernhardt). ♦ Dec. 29-Jan. 11 at 1, 2:50, 4:40, 6:30, 8:20, and 10:10: "The Mystery of Picasso" (†).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—Through Jan. 2: A Luis Buñuel centennial retrospective. Unless otherwise noted, all films are in Spanish. Dec. 19 at 2:30: "This Strange Passion" (1952). ♦ Dec. 19 at 6 and Dec. 22 at 2:30: "Death in the Garden" (1956; in French). ♦ Dec. 21 at 2:30: "The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz" (1955). ♦ Dec. 21 at 6 and Dec. 26 at 2:30: "Nazarin" (1958) and "Simon of the Desert" (1965). ♦ Dec. 22 at 6 and Dec. 23 at 5: "Fever Mounts in El Pao" (1959; in French). ♦ Dec. 22 at 8 and Dec. 23 at 2: "The Young One" (1960; in English and Spanish). ♦ Dec. 24 at 2: "Cela S'Appelle l'Aurore" (1955; in French). ♦ Dec. 26 at 6 and Dec. 31 at 2: "The Exterminating Angel" (1962). ♦ Dec. 28 at 2:30 and Dec. 29 at 8: "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie" (1972; in French and Spanish). ♦ Dec. 28 at 6 and Dec. 29 at 2:30: "Diary of a Chambermaid" (1963; in French). ♦ Dec. 29 at 6 and Dec. 30 at 2: "Viridiana" (1961). ♦ Dec. 30 at 5: "The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe" (1956).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (875-5600)—Through Dec. 27: Contemporary cinema from Spain. All films are in Spanish. Dec. 20 at 1 and 9:15: "Jamón, Jamón" (1991, Bigas Luna). ♦ Dec. 20 at 5 and Dec. 24 at 6: "The Washington Wolves" (1999, Mariano Barroso). ♦ Dec. 20 at 3 and 7 and Dec. 23 at 4: "Ecstasy" (1995, Barroso). ♦ Dec. 21 at 1, 5:30, and 9:45: "The Dog in the Manger" (1995, Pilar Miró). ♦ Dec. 21 at 3:15 and 7:40: "Flowers from Another World" (1999, Icíar Bollain). ♦ Dec. 22 at 1 and 5 and Dec. 23 at 6: "Gitano" (2000, Manuel Palacios). ♦ Dec. 22 at 3 and 9: "I Know Who You Are" (1999, Patricia Ferreira). ♦ Dec. 22 at 7, Dec. 24 at 4, and Dec. 26 at 7:30: "The Mafia in Havana" (1999, Ana Díez). ♦ Dec. 23 at 8 and Dec. 26 at 1 and 5:15: "Plenilunio" (2000, Imanol Uribe). ♦ Dec. 26 at 3:15 and 9:15: "Monkeys Like Becky" (1999, Joaquín Jordá). ♦ Dec. 27 at 1, 5:15, and 9:30: "Second Skin" (1999, Gerardo Vera). ♦ Dec. 27 at 3:15 and 7:30: "Numbered Days" (1994, Uribe). ♦ Dec. 29-Jan. 4: A Terence Davies retrospective. Dec. 29 at 1, 5, and 9, Dec. 31 at 4, and Jan. 1 at 2 and 6: "Distant Voices, Still Lives" (1988). ♦ Dec. 29 at 3 and 7 and Dec. 30 at 4: "The Terence Davies Trilogy" (1984). ♦ Dec. 30 at 6 and 9:40 and Jan. 1 at 4 and 8: "The Long Day Closes" (1992). ♦ Dec. 30 at 7:45 and Dec. 31 at 6: "The Neon Bible" (1995).

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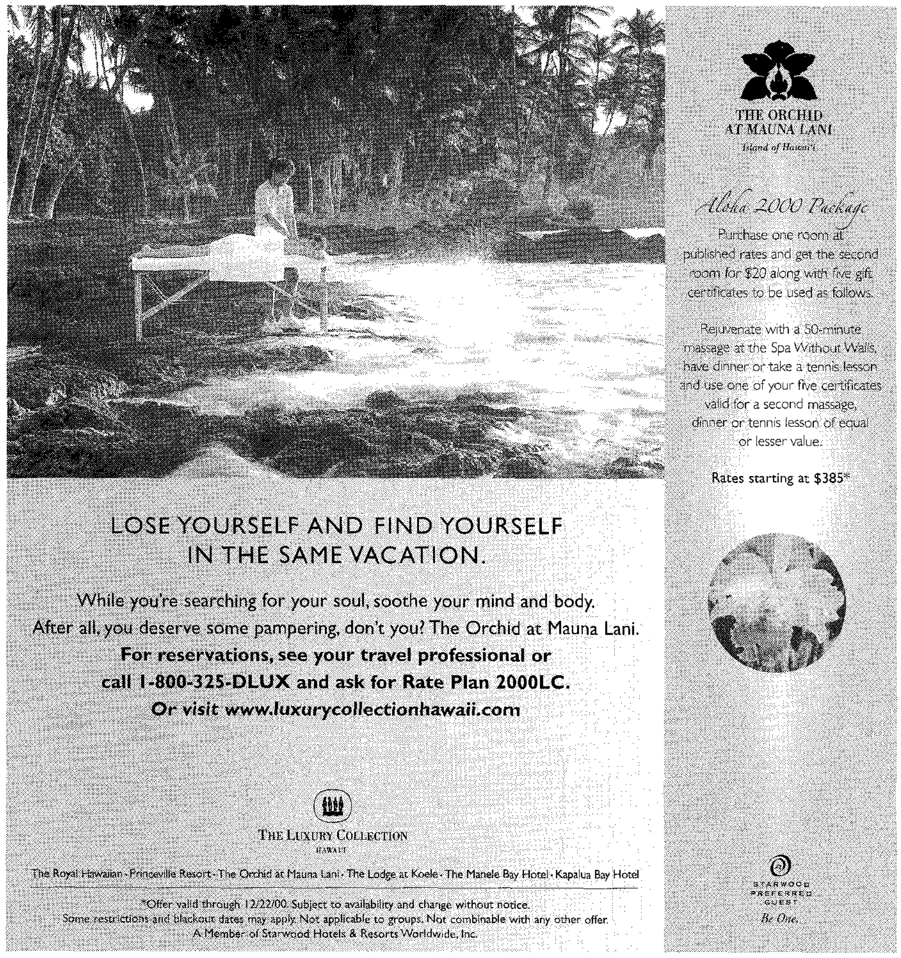

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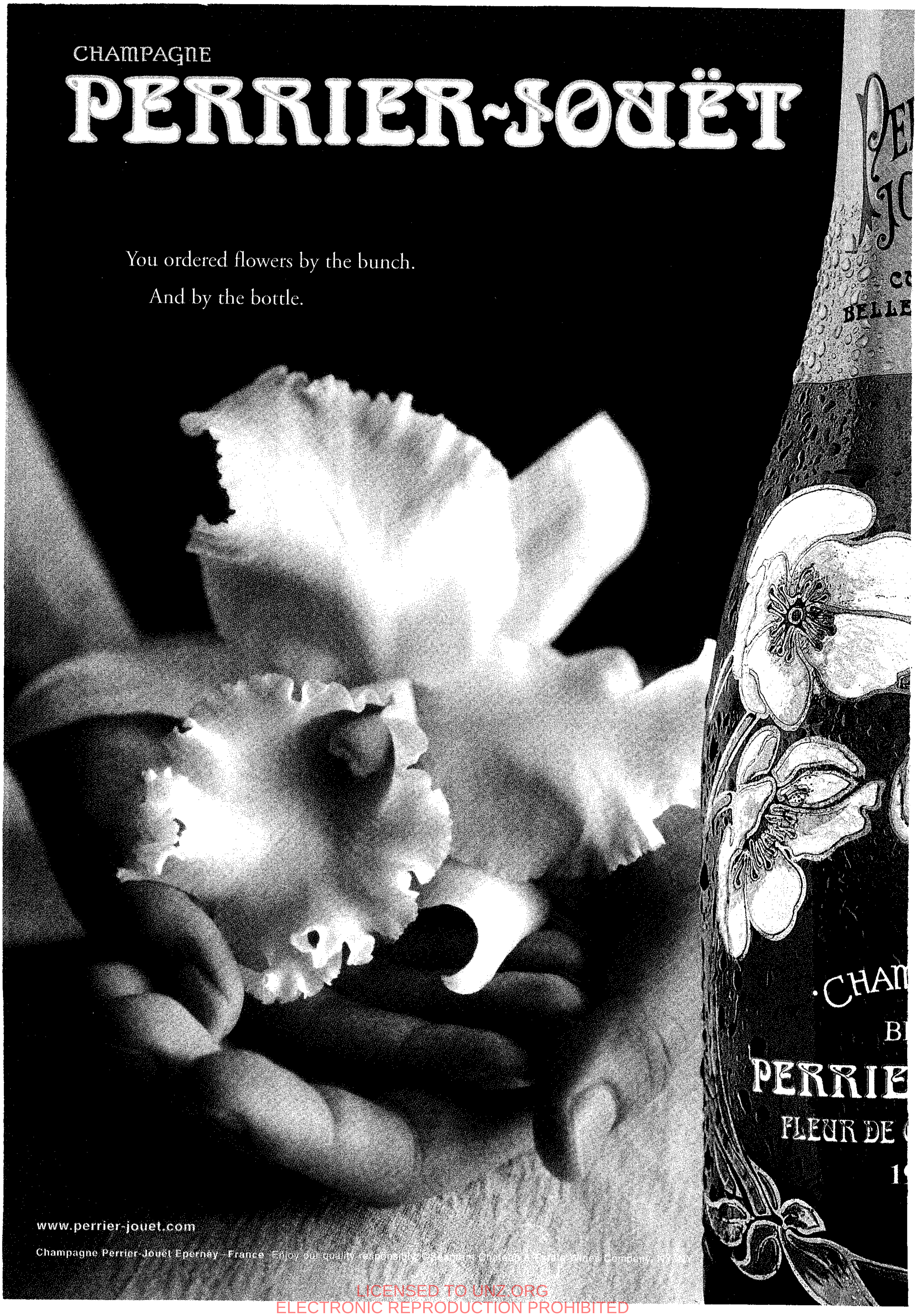
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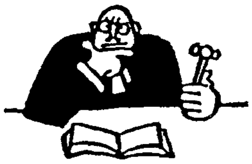
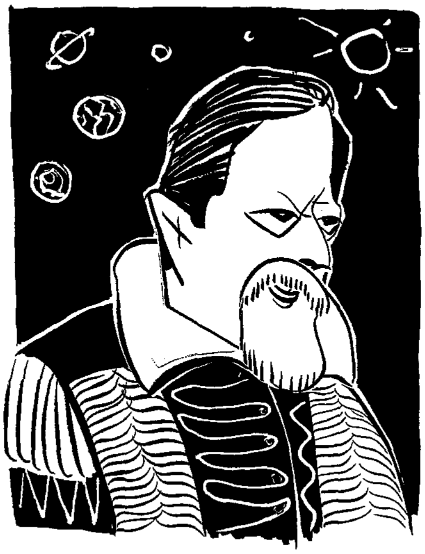


That was a tough concession speech Al Gore had to give the other night, but people have had to give tougher ones over the years. In 1633, a prominent, well-connected member of the high-tech community of Florence found himself on the wrong end of a decision by the then equivalent of the Supreme Court. Put on trial by the Inquisition, he was found guilty of advocating a doctrine described in the Holy Office's indictment as "absurd and false philosophically, because it is expressly contrary to Holy Scripture." This was a characterization with which the defendant was known to privately disagree. But he was anxious to avoid being cast as a troublemaker and eager for the healing to begin, so he said the words the occasion required. "I, Galileo, son of the late Vincenzo Galilei, Florentine, aged seventy years," he recited, "abjure, curse, and detest the aforesaid errors and heresies, and I swear that I will never again say or assert that the Sun is the center of the universe and immovable and that the Earth is not the center and moves." Before Galileo was led away to spend the rest of his life under comfortable house arrest, however, he kicked the ground and, according to legend, muttered, "*Eppur si muove*"—"But still, it moves."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

Vice-President Gore, too, offered the required pieties last Wednesday evening—about putting rancor aside, about love of country, about how "that which unites us is greater than that which divides us." He did so with considerable grace and a few touches of rueful humor. He permitted himself only the faintest of heretical intimations: a declaration that he continues to "strongly disagree with the Court's decision" (coupled, to be sure, with an assurance that he accepts it); a mention of "those who feel their voices have not been heard," which might be taken as a reference to those whose votes remain uncounted; and an explanation that he was conceding because he was concerned about "our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy"—that is to say, not because he had lost the election.



Al Gore

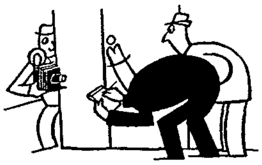
And indeed he did not, as far as science can determine, lose the election. He lost the post-election, in which the franchise, it turned out, was limited to certain members of the Supreme Court. The embarrassment of this was evident even to them. At exactly this time of year four decades ago, John F. Kennedy made up his mind that he was going to appoint his kid brother Robert Attorney General. Benjamin Bradlee asked him how he planned to make the announcement. "Well," the President-elect replied, "I think I'll open the front door of the Georgetown house some morning about 2 A.M., look up and down the street, and, if there's no one there, I'll whisper, 'It's Bobby.'" The Court last week actually did what J.F.K. joked about, except that what the Court whispered into the darkness was nothing so forthright as "It's Bush." While millions watched in bafflement, network and cable television news correspondents, many of them lawyers trained to skim judicial opinion for its gist, struggled to make sense of the majority opinion's verbiage. It's no wonder they were confused: the crabbed, ugly language had been crafted to obscure what had been decided, and even who had done the deciding. As the indispensable Linda Greenhouse noted a couple of days later in the *Times*, the opinion, which was unsigned, was styled "per curiam," meaning "by the court"—"a label used by courts almost exclusively for unanimous opinions so uncontroversial as to not be worth the trouble of a formal opinion-writing process." It took the experts the better part of an hour just to deduce that the ruling was by a five-to-four vote: to solve the mystery, they had to identify the authors of the overlapping dissents, add them up, and subtract from nine. In the text itself, the only clue to the breakdown was an innocent-sounding sentence—"Seven Justices of the Court agree that there are constitutional problems with the recount ordered by the Florida Supreme Court that demand a remedy"—which suggested that the opinion, or part of it, had been agreed to by all but two Justices. This was false. But it was only a drop in the rancid bucket of the majority's bad faith.

The in-house reviews were not kind. The Court's decision "can only lend credence to the most cynical appraisal of the work of judges throughout the land" (Justice Stevens). "There is no justification for denying the State the opportunity to try to count all disputed ballots now" (Justice Souter). "I dissent" (Justice Ginsburg, omitting the customary softener, "respectfully"). The decision is "a self-inflicted wound—a wound that may harm not just the Court, but the Nation" (Justice Breyer). The clarity of the dissenters' prose and reasoning only makes their anger and sorrow more striking.

On the basis of the available evidence—not least the ruthless determination of the Republican Party to use all the powers at its command, from the executive and legislative branches of the Florida state government to the five-person Supreme Court bloc (now exposed not as jurisprudential conservatives but as ideological and nakedly partisan ones), for the single purpose of preventing a fair count of the ballots of Florida's citizens—it may now be inferred, pending the eventual recount by scholars and journalists under Florida's freedom-of-information laws, that the President-elect (a suddenly Orwellian honorific) lost not only the popular but also the true electoral vote. Nevertheless, the election of 2000 was not stolen. Stealing, after all, is illegal, and, by definition, nothing the Justices of the Supreme Court do can be outside the law. They are the law. The election was not stolen. It was expropriated.

—*Hendrik Hertzberg*

THE BENCH
A SUPREME COURT PIZZA PARTY



In ordinary circumstances, the pressroom of the United States Supreme Court has the hushed feel of a law library. There are two long wooden tables surrounded by what look like carrels, which are reserved for a handful of regulars. Like the Court itself, the pressroom is a place of steady habits—the year begins on the first Monday in October, the arguments start at 10 A.M. sharp—and this is what made the events of last week so extraordinary.

After the arguments in the case of Bush v. Gore on Monday, the usual pressroom crew of a dozen-plus reporters had grown to more than fifty. At ten o'clock on Tuesday morning—the opinions are usually handed out at ten, too—the TV reporters put on their coats and prepared to sprint to their camera locations outside, but there was no news. Then the vigil began in earnest.

The Supreme Court is still one of the few relatively leakproof institutions in Washington, so the search for clues about when the ruling might come became desperate. Itchy reporters monitored the movements of Kathy Arberg, the Court's public-information officer, as if she were some kind of lab rat. Was she walking faster? Closing her door? Going to "lunch"? No clue was too small to dissect. The activities of the Supreme Court police, famous for their stone-faced surveillance of protesters, drew similar scrutiny. Were they gathering? Rustling? No one could say.

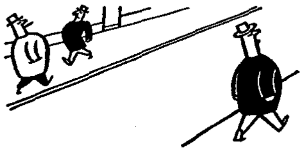
Then came the poinsettia rumor. Arberg's staff had placed a large potted poinsettia on a table where opinions are sometimes stacked. In the late afternoon, a Supreme Court employee walked in and moved it from one end of the table to the other. Was Arberg's staff making room to distribute the Justices' decision? It turned out that a Court staff member had noticed that reporters without seats were perching on the table. The poinsettia had been relocated to keep it from being knocked over.

When it became clear that Arberg was ordering dinner for herself, the reporters followed suit. Someone had the rare privilege of acting out a real-life version of an old Washington joke: "Can you send nine pizzas to the Supreme Court, four with mushrooms, four with pepperoni, and one plain?" The pressroom, usually so tidy, began to look like a frat house, with bits of microwave popcorn drifting into puddles of spilled coffee.

The end came in an orderly fashion. At about nine-forty, Ed Turner, Arberg's deputy, entered the room and announced, "We're going to make a line." He read out the names of the permanent members of the Supreme Court press corps, and they dutifully queued up in the marble hallway. The parvenus stacked up behind them. At nine-fifty-two, the large cardboard boxes of opinions appeared, and the line moved at the nervous, half-running pace of paratroopers jumping out of a plane. Members of Arberg's staff had arranged for reporters to make a quick exit to the street through the door of the Supreme Court gift shop. It was a courtesy, they said, but there was a sense, too, that the sooner everyone was gone the better.

—*Jeffrey Toobin*

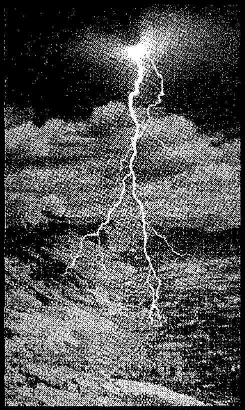
ON THE BOWERY
THE MAYOR'S COAT

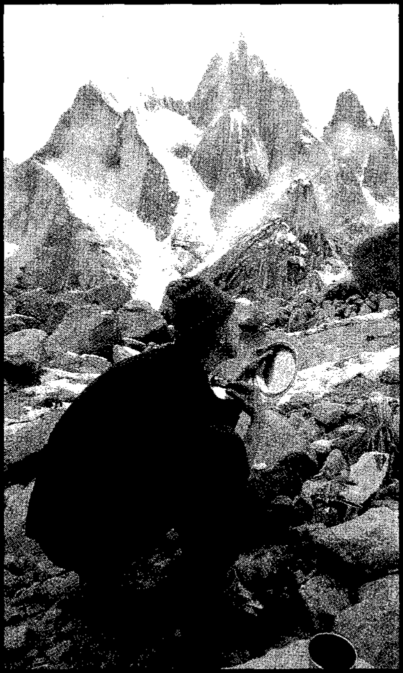


This winter, there are two people walking around New York City wearing the Mayor's coat. One is the Mayor, of course. The other is Harry Ecclesiaste. Harry lives at the Bowery Mission, and he became the new owner of the Mayor's coat the other day, when Mayor Giuliani dropped by to kick off the Mission's annual coat drive for the homeless. Harry was first in line for a donated coat. When the proceedings began, the Mayor motioned to Harry to pick any coat in the pile. Harry, however, had his eye on one in particular. He looked at the Mayor and said, "How about yours?" The Mayor handed it over.

Harry Ecclesiaste is forty-nine years old; he wears a small and slightly silver mustache and, like the Mayor, about a

CARS ARE





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size-40 coat. Harry moved to the United States from Haiti in 1975, and he first visited the hundred-and-twenty-one-year-old mission a year ago, accepting food and an occasional shower. At the time, he was a drug addict who lived underground, in subway tunnels. Harry eventually got control of his addiction and qualified to live at the Bowery Mission, where he now works in maintenance and in the outreach program.

Mayor Giuliani

Recently, he was sitting in the Mission's dining hall, enjoying a plate of barbecued chicken and a side of rice and beans; the walls were decorated with passages from the Bible and a Heimlich-maneuver chart. "Believe me, I don't know how I got here," he said, in his thick West Indian accent.

It was no surprise to anyone working at the Mission that Harry ended up acquiring the coat off the mayoral back; Harry is known as a can-do resident—an enthusiastic singer in the choir, a decent guitar player, and a guy with a knack for fixing up discarded TV sets and electronic devices and passing them out to other residents. His nickname is Mr. Fix-It. "God gave me a gift and I just use it," Harry said. "You know what they say in New York City—a rich man's garbage is a poor man's riches. Hey, I got two CD players upstairs. If you're interested, I can give you one."

Harry will not be wearing the Mayor's coat on a daily basis; usually, he prefers his donated windbreaker. But he did need an overcoat to go with the donated suit he had recently picked up. He plans to wear the two together on special occasions. His first special occasion would come on the following Sunday morning, when he and a few other residents of the Bowery Mission were to be driven to a church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where they would speak of their life experiences. Harry hoped to be mistaken for a preacher. "When you first look on me, you'll say, 'That's Reverend Tutu!' " he said.

Harry wasn't very concerned about what the Mayor was going to do without his coat. "He's got his warm car waiting for him," he said. "And when he gets home he's got another coat waiting for him. Man, I'd like to see his closet!"

After dinner the other night, Harry was persuaded to model his new coat. It is a wool overcoat, thick and charcoal gray, from Lord & Taylor. It has surprisingly deep pockets. "It comes with a scarf and hat, too," Harry said, showing off the tan-and-brown scarf and the plain brown tweed cap that the Mayor had apparently felt compelled to throw in. "God bless the Mayor," Harry said. He added, "I'm not giving it back."

Some of the other men standing around spotted him in the coat. Harry smiled and tipped his hat.

"Hey, Mayor!" one guy shouted.

"Hey, Mayor Giuliani!" another guy said. Then he corrected himself. "Hey, Mayor *Harry!*"

—*Robert Sullivan*

DEPT. OF BELLES LETTRES
A CRITICAL CLINIC

There's nothing like a thoracic invasion to get a novelist really pumped. "I must tell you, it was completely amazing," Michael Ondaatje said recently. Ondaatje, the author of "The English Patient," was sitting in a dim office at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, in Washington Heights, where he recently began a stint as the hospital's first writer in residence, and where he'd just witnessed his first quadruple bypass. "I was standing two feet away from the heart. Just staring down into the patient's body. What could be more fascinating?"

Down the hall, in a conference room equipped with an X-ray scanning screen, sixteen doctors, nurses, hospital employees, and medical students were seated around a wooden table waiting for their weekly seminar with Ondaatje.

"I've been fixated on doctors since I was a boy," the fifty-seven-year-old writer said as he got up to join his pupils. "I wanted to talk to them about books the same way you would X-ray a body—to see how it worked, how it was made."

The work under discussion that day was William Maxwell's novel "So Long, See You Tomorrow." Things got off to a shaky start when Richard Mayeux, a middle-aged neurologist whose specialty is Alzheimer's, raised his hand and volunteered an opinion.

"The protagonist seems to be suffering from an unresolved narcissistic injury," Dr. Mayeux said. He cited a medical text to support his diagnosis. Ondaatje gently shot this one down. "Since the novel uses flashbacks," he said, "why don't we talk about memory?"

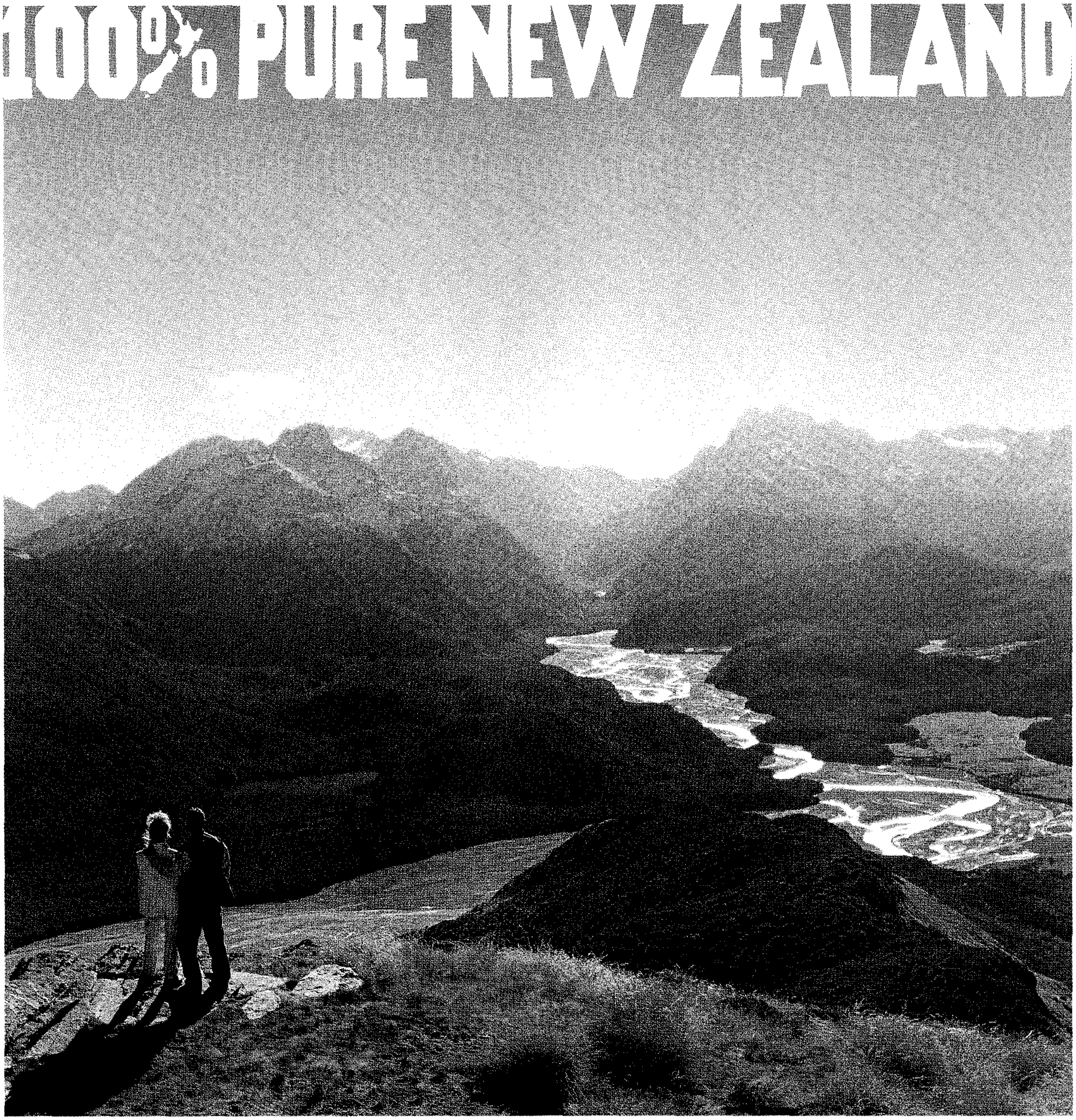
A young staff member named Rebecca Garden took up the challenge. "Whenever you remember something and put the memory in long-term storage, new proteins are produced in the brain," she said. "Right?"

Ondaatje gave her a puzzled but kindly look. She continued, "The act of remembering changes the chemistry and, therefore, the memory itself. This shows that memory is not objective. That's what Maxwell is getting at."

A student across the table scribbled intently in a spiral notebook.

After the class was over, Eric David, a third-year medical student who had come to the seminar room fresh from the O.R., where he had assisted at a radical prostatectomy, said, "Doctors dismantle human beings. It's what separates us from the rest of the world. You have to fight the temptation to turn off." He hoped that the reading list Ondaatje had drawn up (the next two authors on the syllabus were W. G. Sebald and Anne Carson) might work to counteract the professional chill. "It helps you remember that everyone has a story," he said.

Ondaatje says that he dreamed up the writer-in-residence idea several years ago, when Rita Charon, the head of Columbia's Program in Narrative Medicine,



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"I suppose it has to do with rescue and healing," he said, explaining his attraction to the place. "Our lives are all so dangerous, precarious—you could even say *abandoned*. Rescue and healing are essential things."

For the healers, meanwhile, it has to do—at least, in part—with not saying or doing something stupid in front of a famous writer. "It's sort of awkward," said Dan Engber, a Ph.D. student in neuroscience who attends the seminar. "Sometimes I think we're trying to prove that we're not just a bunch of dumb docs."

—*Mark Matousek*

MILAN NOTEBOOK
A NIGHT AT LA SCALA

A hundred years ago, when Giuseppe Verdi lay dying in the Grand Hotel in Milan, just a few doors down from La Scala, the city had the street covered with straw so that the clatter of horseshoes would not disturb the ailing maestro. No one, however, has yet devised a system to hush the voices of the *loggionisti*, the diehard opera fans who often wait in line for hours to buy standing-room tickets, and who are known for shouting out their candid appraisals of the singers from the upper galleries.

Opening night at La Scala is one of the most important social events in Italy, and it draws aristocrats, politicians, and socially ambitious business leaders. (This year, the local press floated rumors that Madonna and Jennifer Lopez would attend.) The season première, which took place on December 7th, was a performance of Verdi's beloved "Il Trovatore," and it kicked off a yearlong celebration of the centenary of the composer's death.

The opera was conducted by Riccardo Muti, who is perhaps Italy's most highly regarded interpreter of Verdi, and it featured the thirty-two-year-old tenor Salvatore Licitra, who has been called "the new Pavarotti." At the end of the third act, Licitra stood at stage right and delivered the famous aria "Di quella pira." That's when the trouble started. From the upper galleries, loud booing and cries of "Shame!" could be heard. This elicited a round of communal shushing from the bejewelled and tuxedoed patrons in the boxes and the orchestra seats. Then, in a voice nearly as loud as any heard from the stage that night, one of the *loggionisti*, a bank teller named Mauro Fuolega, shrieked, "It's the conductor's fault!" Muti, clearly indignant, stopped the performance and turned around. He tossed back his hair and looked toward his critic in the gallery. "Let's not turn Verdi's centennial into a circus," Muti said in a low, steely voice. He then resumed the performance, while the murmurs from the audience drowned out the opening strains of the soprano's *recitativo*.

What had angered the *loggionisti* was a missing high C, the famous *do di petto*, with which tenors have traditionally ended "Di quella pira." Licitra is more than capable of hitting the C. In Verdi's original score, however, the aria ends on a lower C—and that is how Licitra ended it on Thursday night.

When the curtain fell, those patrons who had seats rewarded Muti and the singers with a seven-minute ovation. Later, at a private dinner for opera patrons held in an eighteenth-century gymnasium, Muti explained that the *do di petto* had originated with the nineteenth-century French tenor Carlo Baucardé. But he said that he had considered it his duty to honor the composer's intentions by leaving out the high C. The word "minimalist" is seldom heard in the context of opera, but one of Muti's dinner companions acclaimed the performance as "minimalist Verdi," and this phrase made the rounds of the glittering tables.

Mauro Fuolega, meanwhile, was home brooding. According to the *Corriere della Sera*, the passionate bank teller spent a sleepless night. He stands by his negative opinion of Muti's minimalism. But he regrets his outburst. He has noticed that his friends have been wary of him in the wake of the scandal. "I don't know if I will go back to La Scala anytime soon," he said.

—*Jay McInerney*

RECENTLY DISCOVERED CHILDHOOD LETTERS TO SANTA

December, 1932

Dear Mr. Claus,

I don't believe I would be disingenuous or resorting to tergiversation if I maintained that I have been a paradigm of meritorious behavior in the past year. I do not wish to expatiate on this entreaty ad nauseam, but I remain sanguine about your decision to accede to my request.

Admiringly,
William Buckley

1880

Dear Santa,

I hope you can find the way to our house. Most people take the wrong road. You will be pretty tired after travelling all those miles, but then you'll be able to get a good night's sleep.

Robert Frost

1931

Dear Santa,

Please bring me the following toys for Christmas: Hopalong Cassidy six-shooter, Daisy air rifle, J. Edgar Hoover model tommy gun, Tom Mix model Colt Army revolver.

Chuck Heston

1786

Dear Santa, St. Nicholas, Father Christmas, Kris Kringle,

I have been a good, fine, virtuous boy, lad, child, youth. I want, desire, wish for a set, complete assortment, collection of books, tomes, editions, publications of the medical art, healing, therapies, and curatives.

Thank you, many thanks, much obliged,

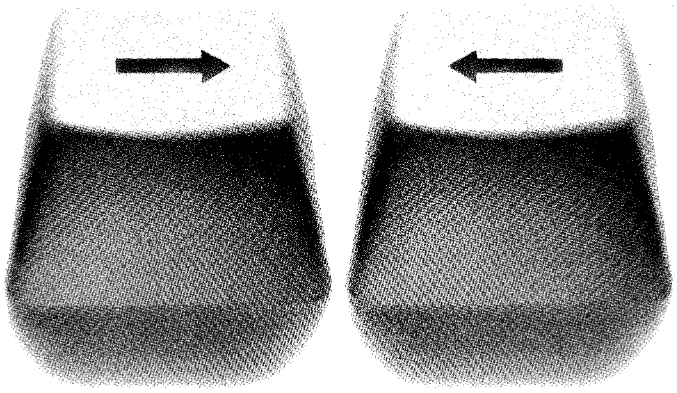
Peter Roget

1934

Listen, you fat hockey puck, if I don't get what I want for Christmas I hope you get fleas in your beard and your lead reindeer gets a hernia.

Donald Rickles

—*Johnny Carson*



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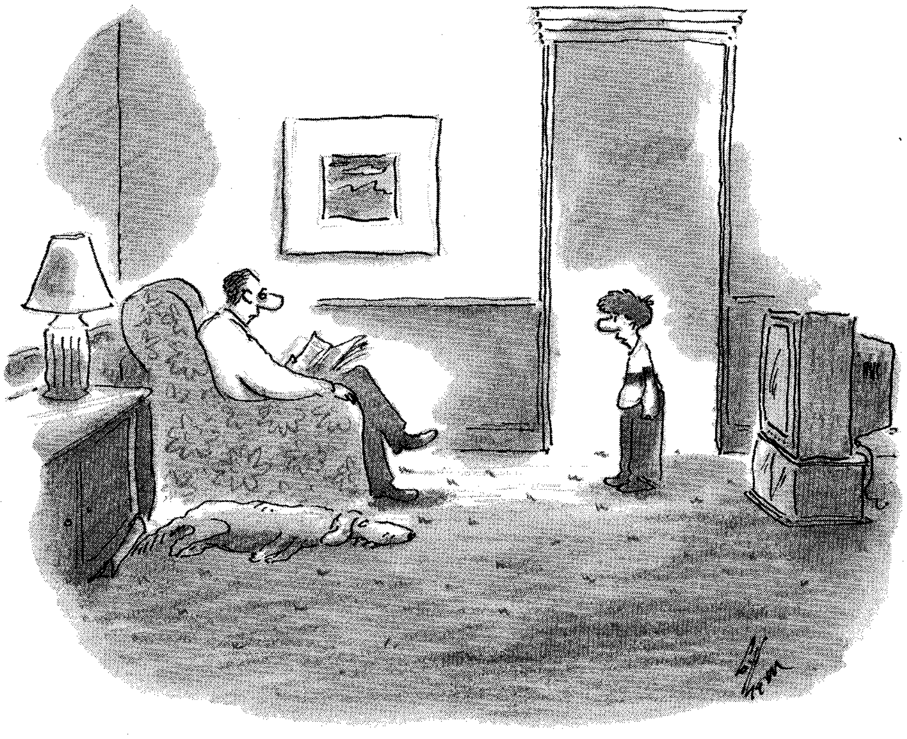
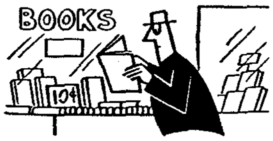


"I need more time to study your decision."

• •

BEIJING POSTCARD
GAO WHO?



Nobody was selling books outside Beijing's Qianmen subway station two Sundays ago. Venders hawked other products: decks of marked playing cards, Spy Toy listening devices, and special mah-jongg sets sold with spectacles that enable cheaters to see invisible identity marks. A cluster of salespeople hung around the subway exit, mumbling, "Receipt, receipt, receipt." They were selling bogus ninety-six-dollar expense vouchers from the Jingxi Hotel for less than four bucks.

Qianmen has always been an excellent place to buy illegal goods or fatten an expense account, and in the past dealers also sold banned books—"Mao and His Women," "The Last Years of Deng Xiaoping," "Princelings of the Communist Party." Often, the dealers kept the volumes in the lining of their coats, which they opened flasher style. But that Sunday there wasn't a single book in sight. "I haven't seen anybody selling books here for months," a receipt vender said.

Qianmen was the starting point in a quest to find the works of Gao Xingjian, who later that day, in Stockholm, became the first Chinese author to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Since 1985, his books have been banned on the mainland, and, apart from a few brief comments condemning the award as politically motivated, the government-controlled media has suppressed reports of the Swedish Academy's decision. (Gao lives in exile, in France.) At the Beijing Book Building, the city's largest bookstore, employee No. 1091 curtly said, "We don't have his books here." She, at least, knew who Gao was. Most Chinese haven't even heard of him. But just about any Beijing resident can suggest a place to buy illegal books, which are often copied from Hong Kong or Taiwanese editions.

"Try the Dongzhimen station, or maybe the universities in the Haidian area," the receipt vender said.

The next stop was People's University, where there used to be a row of small bookstores that carried illegal editions. "They tore them down last October, to widen the sidewalk," said the manager of the last remaining shop, which is across from the college's front gate. Out in front, credential venders lined the sidewalk, murmuring, "Diploma, diploma, diploma." A forged undergraduate degree started at a hundred and twenty dollars; twenty-four hundred for a fake passport. False-identity cards cost eighteen bucks. The bookstore manager was asked about Gao. "He's not really Chinese, is he?" he said. "I thought he was French. We don't have his books here. I've heard they aren't very good, anyway."

Near Beijing University, the clerk at the Ten Thousand Spirits Bookstore said he had no idea who Gao Xingjian was. An elderly customer overheard him and chuckled. He had a quick smile and intelligent eyes and brilliant white hair: a retired professor. He knew about Gao Xingjian. "Try the Haidian Book City," he said. "Go to the bookshops on the second floor, across from the Workers Publishing House. If you're patient, they'll show you banned books."

One of the bookshops was called the Friendship Publishing Company. Outside the building, it was well below freezing, and people were selling black-market CD-ROMs and pornographic videodisks. The porno dealers were women, and each of them carried an infant, for safety. The women mumbled, "Yellow video, yellow video, yellow video." ("Yellow" is slang for pornography.) One of them explained that as long as they carried babies the cops wouldn't take them to jail. The worst the police would do is confiscate the movies. She flashed three of her disks: "Anerotic," "A Woman's Love," and a yellow version of "Driving Miss Daisy." Her baby's face was red.

It was a lot warmer inside. "Somebody else asked about Gao Xingjian a couple of days ago," the clerk said. She had never heard of the author before that, though, and she said they had stopped carrying illegal books because inspectors had been coming every few days. But the clerk pointed to the shelf of foreign works in translation, which included "Ulysses," a biography of Franz Kafka, "Bridget Jones's Diary," and a five-part series of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's works. They were legal, the clerk said, and some of them were very good.

—*Peter Hessler*

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THE FINANCIAL PAGE
CHRYSLER'S NEW BEST FRIEND

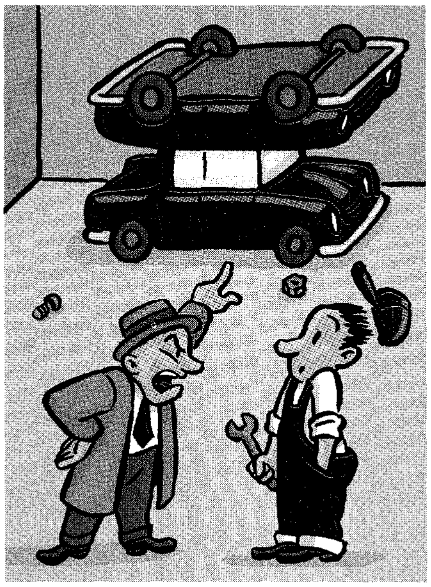
Kirk Kerkorian is no one's idea of a do-gooder. He's not exactly Mr. Capitalism 2000, either. In more than half a century of wheeling and dealing, the eighty-three-year-old billionaire has earned a reputation as a crafty dealmaker with a style more Vegas circa 1974 than Silicon Valley 1999. Kerkorian has bought the same company, M-G-M, three times, pocketing profits of more than a billion dollars. Known as "the Perry Como of the craps table"—for his cool at the casino—he has also been seen as a ruthless corporate raider who extracted what have been called "greenmail" payments from Western Airlines, in 1976, and from Columbia Pictures, in 1981. In the nineties, he and Lee Iacocca teamed up in a failed effort to take over Chrysler, which ended with Chrysler agreeing to a slew of initiatives friendly to Mr. K.

Jürgen Schrempp, on the other hand, was supposed to be the face of the future. As C.E.O. of Daimler-Benz, the German automaker, he promised to bring American-style capitalism to a country where business often depended on backroom deals and personal relationships. Daimler was the first German company to be listed on the New York Stock Exchange, and its 1998 merger with Chrysler created a global juggernaut, which was dubbed "Welt A.G." by the German press. With his mantra of "shareholder value," Schrempp was the epitome of the new-model German executive, perfectly suited to the demands of the global economy.

So when Kirk Kerkorian sued DaimlerChrysler for nine billion dollars a few weeks ago, alleging that Schrempp had "blatantly lied" to Chrysler shareholders in general and Kerkorian in particular about the nature of the Daimler-Chrysler merger, it was easy to dismiss the suit as just another old-school ploy. Kerkorian, who owned fourteen per cent of Chrysler when he signed off on the deal, was frustrated that he'd made the wrong bet. (The merger's been a disaster, with DaimlerChrysler's shares down sixty per cent from their high, costing Kerkorian about two billion dollars.) He was, characteristically, using the courts to feather his nest. At least, that's how his detractors see it; Daimler has dismissed the charges as "completely unsubstantiated."

Isn't it pretty to think so? Kerkorian's history notwithstanding, his lawsuit is not a shakedown. Instead, it's a necessary sally in the quest to get Jürgen Schrempp to pay attention to DaimlerChrysler's shareholders. The real man of the past here is not Kerkorian. It's Schrempp.

The past I'm referring to is that dark time before shareholder activism brightened the American business landscape. Twenty years ago, C.E.O.s paid little attention to what their companies' shareholders—the people who actually owned the companies—wanted. This changed with the takeovers, L.B.O.s, and proxy battles of the eighties and early nineties, which taught C.E.O.s that they were expendable. That lesson laid the groundwork for the boom of the past decade.



But the shareholder revolution never really made it to Germany. That's why Schrempp, with his professed focus on shareholder value, seemed so original. But what the Daimler-Chrysler merger has demonstrated, and what Kerkorian's lawsuit has thrown into sharp relief, is that Schrempp's progressive stance was merely a façade. When Schrempp was negotiating the Chrysler deal, he told Kerkorian what he told all Chrysler shareholders: the deal would be "a merger of equals." At the time, Chrysler was rolling in profits and was acclaimed as a powerhouse of marketing and design. So Daimler reassured shareholders that it wouldn't meddle with that success. Sure, the company would be incorporated in Germany—for tax purposes, of course—but Daimler was not taking over Chrysler. No, they'd be partners.

This was all bunk. The men responsible for Chrysler's success are gone, and the company, now run by one of Schrempp's key deputies, is a division of Daimler. (And a troubled one at that: in 1998, it made $4.8 billion in profit; in the most recent quarter, it lost half a billion.) In October, Schrempp told the *Financial Times* that he'd never thought of Chrysler as a partner at all, and that the "merger of equals" talk was just puffery to make it easier for Chrysler to sign the deal.

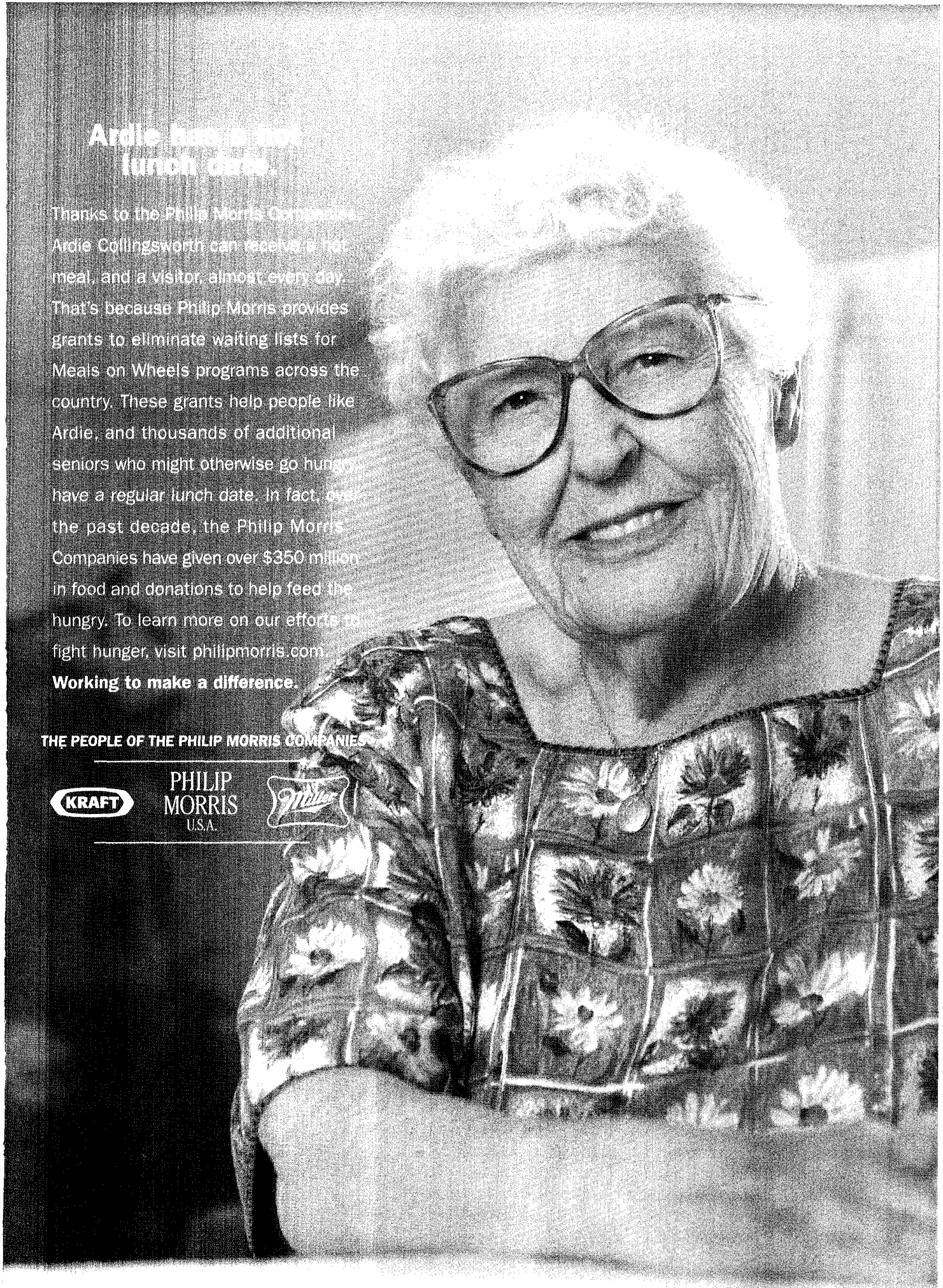
Is this surprising? Perhaps not. "Merger of equals" may sound nice in front of the cameras, but it doesn't work that way in practice. Old hands know this. Just look at Citigroup and Time Warner. What's striking, though, is Schrempp's disdain for his shareholders. It seems we were fooled by his affable *ich bin Amerikaner* manners. Throw the man a white cat and he's Ernst Blofeld.

Schrempp's cynicism shows how little impact the American corporate revolution of the eighties has had on the rest of the world. If he screws up, no big deal. Who's going to kick him out? His chummy board of directors? And he hardly has to worry about a hostile takeover—Germans don't do hostile takeovers. Schrempp has exhibited the serenity of a man with a sinecure.

Kerkorian's lawsuit has ruffled this serenity, and that's a good thing. When a politician breaks promises, he can be voted out of office. When an American C.E.O. welches, he can get fired. But when a German C.E.O. does it no one has much recourse. Kerkorian is trying to change that. "Kerkorian is not anybody's favorite, but he helps keep executives honest," Michael Useem, the author of "Investor Capitalism," says. "I think Schrempp is learning just how demanding and restless American investors can be." Daimler came to America to teach Chrysler a lesson about German engineering. Now it's getting a lesson in American capitalism.

—*James Surowiecki*

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN



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INFLUENCES

THE CONSTANT MUSE

Travelling with a character-in-waiting.

BY JOHN LE CARRÉ

There was a time when, coming out of a novel, I would hit the ground running. And I knew that if I could just keep on running and not be bothered with all that boring editing and publishing nonsense, I could write another book twice as quickly as the last one. I may even have been right. But not this time. This time, I've come out shuffling. I'm like a jailbird after a long stretch: unready for life, resentful of the separation, nostalgic for the chums I'd been locked up with, and longing to get back inside where I was safe. More strangely, I have unfinished business. I have the feeling that I've written someone else's novel.

The novel in question is called "The Constant Gardener." It describes a middle-aged British diplomat's search for the killers of his murdered young wife, Tessa. The diplomat's name is Justin, and he is a Foreign Office plodder employed in the British High Commission in Nairobi. The story opens with Tessa's death on the shores of Lake Turkana, in northern Kenya, where she was fatally stabbed and the driver of her jeep decapitated. Her companion and putative lover, an African doctor, apparently fled the scene. The story goes on from there.

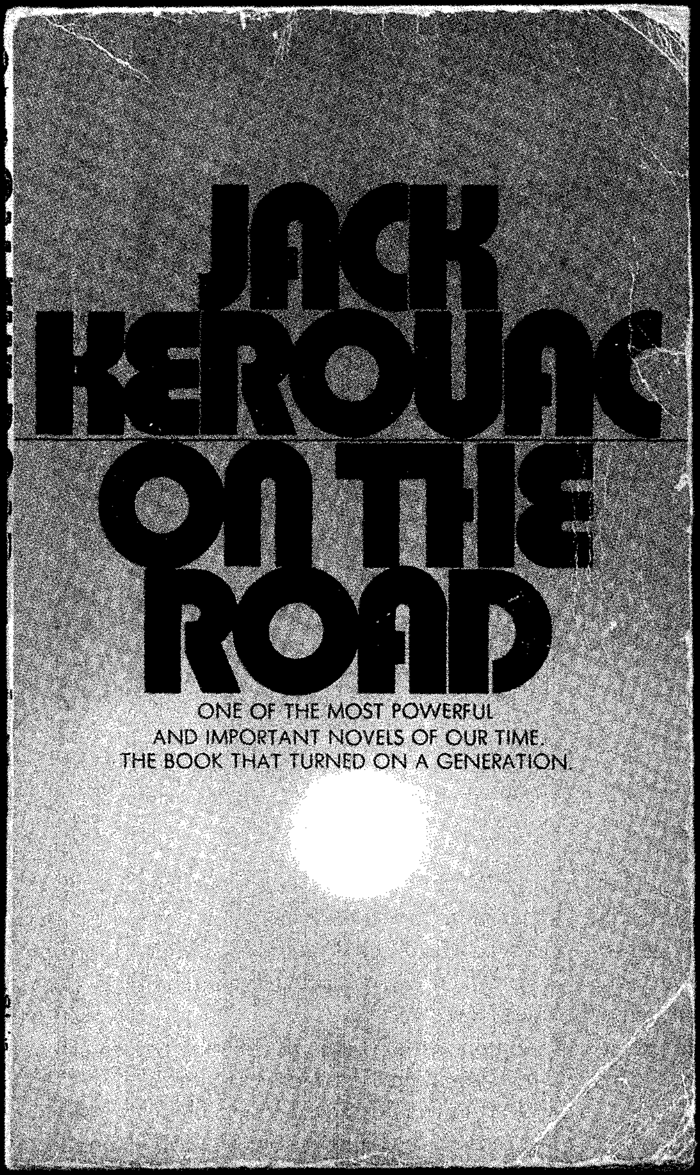
IRAIDA ICAZA; PHOTOGRAPH, CORBIS/SYGMA

When and where did the novel begin? I always ask myself this same dumb question, and find myself fudging the answer, because there isn't one. But this time, surprisingly, I seem to have a few pointers.

Twenty years ago, on a summer's evening, a black-bearded cyclist in a beret rode through the open double doors of the beer hall in Basel where I was drinking, parked his upright push-bike at my table, and filled my head with the wicked goings on of the *multis*, as he called them—the giant multinational pharmaceutical companies that have built their grim castles along the banks of the Upper Rhine. His push-bike was painted white. In those days, white bicycles were symbols of revolt, rather as white shirts later symbolized anti-Noriega protesters in Panama. He had been a chemist, he said, but now he was an anarchist because he refused to take part in the poisoning of mankind. Whatever else he told me I have long forgotten, even if I understood it. As a nonscientist, I was more interested in his anarchism than in his chemistry. But as a writer I was secretly enjoying one of those frissons of forewarning: one day, I'll find a way of writing about you and your *multis*, I thought. And fine: today, twenty years later, I've done it. In the novel, I dump his beard and his bicycle and pour a little cold water on his anarchism. But I keep his *multis*, and his fury, and take them with me to Africa. And my target remains his target: the bad-boy pharmaceutical companies that, in contrast with their ethically minded brothers and sisters in the same industry, would poison the globe if by doing so they could bump up their stock prices.

And it must be five years since I was sitting in a small London restaurant when an elegant, gray-suited English gentleman of the drinking class sidled in with a chatelaine's garden basket under his arm and, moving diffidently from table to table, bestowed a bunch of fresh-cut flowers on each group of diners, male or female, young or old: sweet peas, anemones, and pinks. Where there were couples, he was punctilious about addressing the man. "For your lady, sir, if you will permit me," he murmured in a bottled Oxbridge voice that could have belonged to a festive Jeeves. Nobody offered him money, and he asked for none. He was not the payable type. Our table got sweet peas. I remember the scent. The proprietress got pinks, for which

June 22, 1972. Girlfriend forgets in bus somewhere near Kathmandu.



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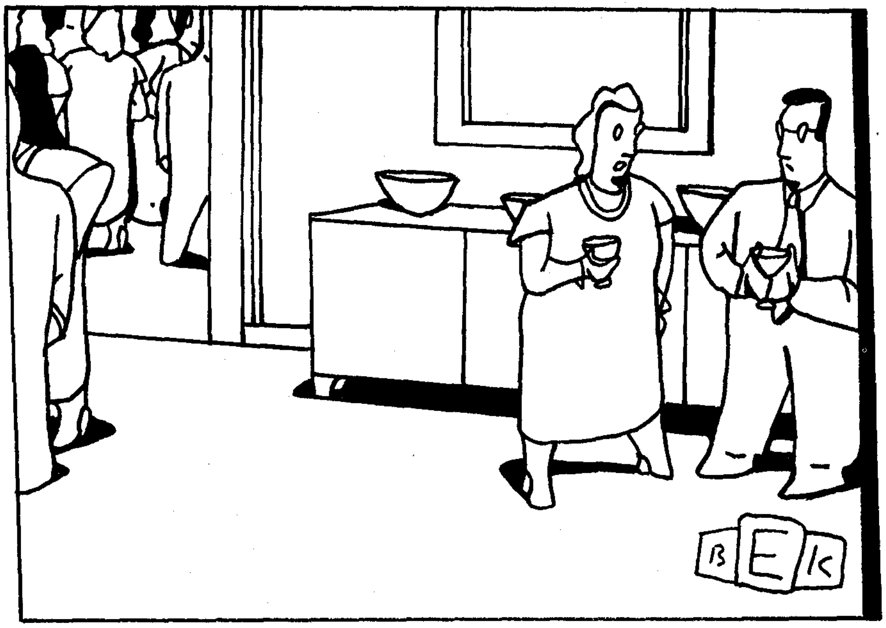


"His volumes speak silences."

• •

he received a glass of wine and a kiss.

"We call him the mad gardener," she said as he shyly took his leave, one hand for the basket, one for the doorpost.

He was an accountant, she thought, but perhaps a lawyer. He owned a large house with a garden. He had suffered a bereavement. Bestowing flowers gave him comfort. I wrote down the title "The Mad Gardener," and I pinned it on my bulletin board. I wrote a first page of a first chapter. A bereaved, eccentric Englishman in a straw hat takes himself to live in Morocco. In the evenings, he wanders the cafés and night clubs, giving flowers to the diners.

> He arrived on the Monday morning steamer, out of season the way they did, another aging, sunburned English bloody fool in a grimy white jacket and striped tie, and a Panama hat with what might have been his regimental colours on the band. Next day he was already ambling along the corniche as if he owned it, chucking up his arm at any stray Arab who gave him half a smile, doffing his Panama to the tourist ladies on their hand-held camels. He put up at the Oasis, not the Metropole—the Oasis with its peeling French colonial façade, and foul food and creaking wooden punkahs in the dining room, being what imperial nostalgics look for. And the Metropole, having all brushed steel and electric doors, being what they are running away from.
>
> His name, if anyone cared, was Clapham. "Like the Junction, old boy. Next stop Battersea. Had it *far* too easy," he would confess with a truthless smile, to whoever would listen to him in the fly-blown watering holes favoured by resident expatriates. "Silver spoon, never did a hand's turn, mustard at exams. Glib, that was my trouble. Terrific charmer, danced with all the ugly girls, thought it was my duty, wasted life, no question," he would confide, as if formulating the epitaph of a lamented friend who just happened to be himself.

But I was foxing the reader a bit here: the person he was really lamenting was his dead wife. I knew it then, and I knew it years later. He was a man in search of a dead love.

I pinned the passage beside the title, where it gathered dust for years, until I took it down and shoved it in a file for lost causes. Rereading it now, and comparing it with the novel I eventually wrote, I can spot similarities that still take me by surprise. First, for reasons I can only guess at, I must have decided quite some time back to set the new novel on the African continent, and when I got down to it I stuck to that notion. In the novel, the time is the present: that is to say, President Moi's kleptocracy, which has been in power for twenty-something years, and Kenya, socially and economically, is gently going to the devil. Second, when I came to put together my character Justin, I made him as British as Mr. Clapham and as gallant, but not yet a failure—rather, a time-serving British diplomat in Nairobi, waiting to be put out to grass. All the same, "Clapham like the junction" is unquestionably an early shot at the character who a couple of years ago, under the name of Justin, barged his way into the novel and took it over, gardening and all. Mr. Clapham is what Justin might have become if, instead of marrying a much younger woman, as he insisted on doing in the novel, he had taken an early retirement and fallen back on his private money, and set himself up as another expatriate Brit with a leftover life to kill.

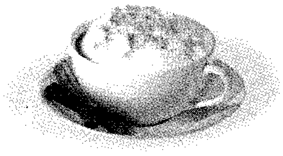
So those were the bits of the story which seemed to have collected in the bottom of my toolbox: a cycling anarchist, a mad gardener, a whiff of pharmaceutical Switzerland, a spent diplomat in a straw hat, a reluctant yen for Africa and former colonies.

And the bereavement—why the bereavement?

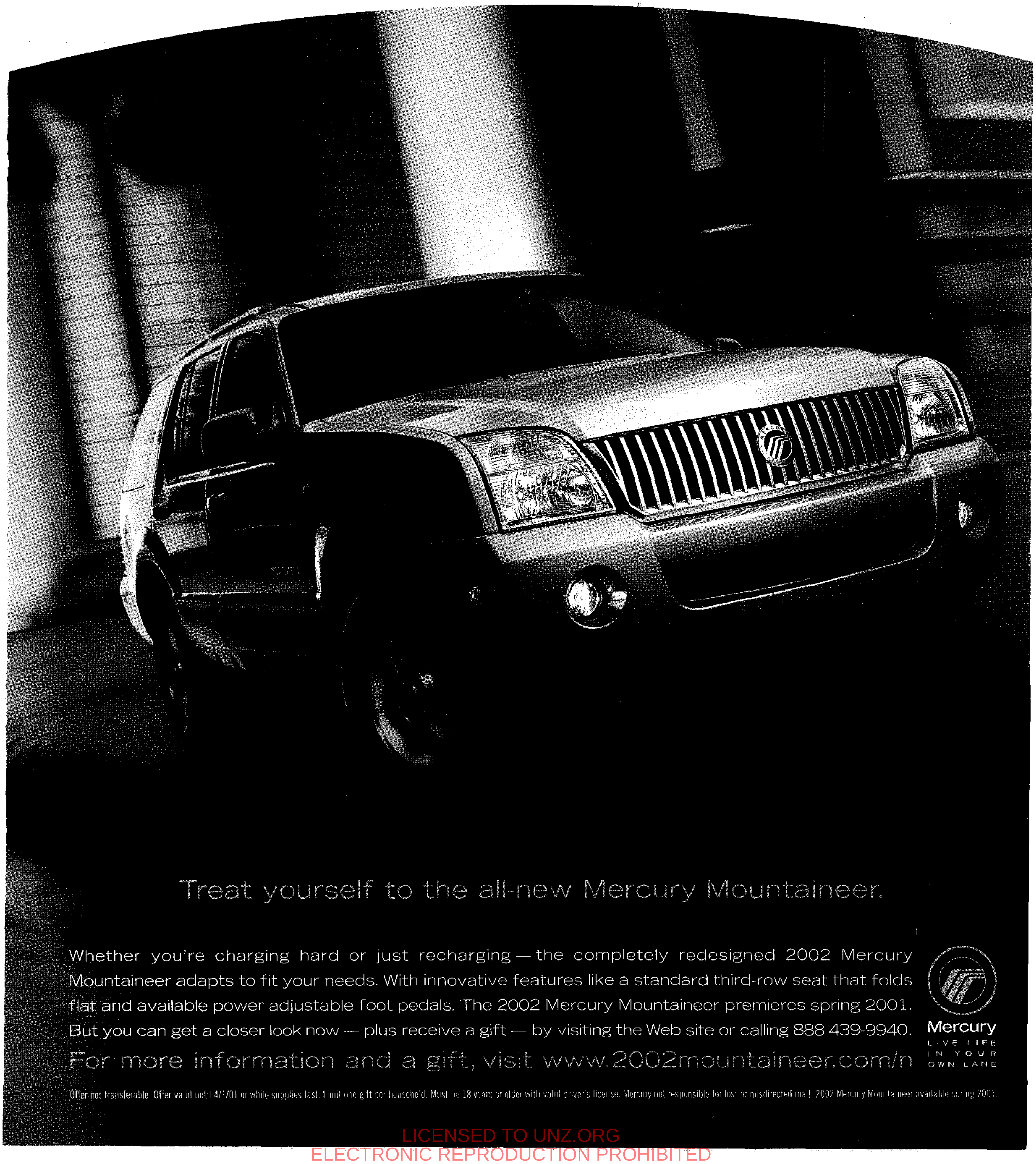
Why did I insist, from the earliest lines of that first mawkish draft and all the way to the finished novel, that my main character had lost somebody very close to him, and was still looking for her? (Tessa was the very antithesis of Justin—headstrong, unswerving, and passionately involved in bringing aid and comfort to Kenya's wretched of the earth, particularly the womenfolk; it was on such a mercy mission that she was murdered.) Why this determination, suddenly, to write about a close and painful loss when none in recent years, thank heaven, had befallen me?

The choice of Africa does not surprise me, though I am always disconcerted to discover with what bravado, with what reckless insouciance, I have committed a couple of years of my life in advance to a subject of which I knew, at the time, next to nothing. Partly, I suppose, there was the lure of getting myself an education. And former colonies have always held an uneasy sway over me, even if my only memories of Africa till then had been lines of striped jeeps queuing up to photograph the same disconsolate lion, and safari lodges swamped with German tour groups. Like many Englishmen of my age, I was brought up to govern the natives of our overseas possessions, and I have always felt embarrassed about that. The expensive English schools that provided me with

Keep pace.



Find peace.



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what we must call an education saw it as their duty to prepare us for the burdens of imperial rule. Once a term, a wandering preacher calling himself a career adviser would descend on our school—founded by King Edward VI and ruled in those days by the rod—and acquaint us en masse with the ways of colonial life in Malaya, Kenya, and India. One well-intentioned old gentleman caused a flutter by warning us that anyone who condemned a native to death jolly well ought to attend his execution. It was our lecturer's definition of fair play. So it's no wonder to me that a sense of colonial guilt lingers over my writing, whether the ex-colony in question is ours or someone else's. Former Palestine, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cambodia, Panama, Ingushetia, and Georgia have all been characters in my earlier books, so why not add Kenya to the list?

Which leaves me with *bereavement*, and the most unsettling passage in my forty years of writing.

Sometime back in the mid-seventies, I decided to alter my way of working. I had become too sedentary, too much the desk officer, not enough the field man. Imagination and deliberately falsified memory were no longer enough. I deserved, and needed, to share the misfortunes I was writing about. It was time I followed the advice I had rather arrogantly given to a painter friend of mine, to stop painting landscapes for a while and go live in one. Henceforth, I promised myself that if I wanted to write about a place I would go there, whether it was Southeast Asia, the Middle East, the Caucasus, or, most recently, Kenya and southern Sudan. In a word, I started writing on the hoof, in the company of whichever secret sharer I had appointed as my main character, and to this day that's what I like to do. For "The Honourable Schoolboy," I selected as my ghostly travelling companion the spy and Fleet Street hack Jerry Westerby. For "The Little Drummer Girl," the actress Charlie. And now, for "The Constant Gardener," the diplomat Justin Quayle. Put unkindly, the process is a kind of deliberately warped journalism, where nothing is quite what it is, and every encounter is examined and, if need be, recast for its dramatic possibilities. The same old corrupt, creative distortions, then, but done from the hip, in the heat of the moment, only later to be reflected on, and rewritten, in tranquillity.

And that was how, in 1974 or so, I came to meet Yvette Pierpaoli, in the house of a German diplomat in the besieged city of Phnom Penh, over a stylish dinner served to the clatter of outgoing gunfire from Lon Nol's palace, a hundred yards down the road. Yvette was accompanied by her companion, Kurt—a Swiss sea captain, what else?—and Kurt and Yvette ran a trading company called Suisindo, which operated from an old stucco house in the center of town. She was a small, sparky, tough, brown-eyed provincial Frenchwoman in her late thirties, by turns vulnerable and raucous, and enormously empathetic. She had all the wiles. She could spread her elbows and upbraid you like a bargee. She could tip you a smile to melt your heart, cajole, flatter, and win you in any way you needed to be won.

But it was all for a cause. And the cause, you quickly learned, was an absolutely nonnegotiable, visceral requirement in her to get food and money to the starving, medicines to the sick, shelter for the homeless, papers for the stateless, and, just generally, in the most secular, muscular, businesslike, down-to-earth way you could imagine, perform miracles. This did not in any way prevent her from being a resourceful and frequently shameless businesswoman, particularly when she was pitched against people whose cash, in her unshakable opinion, would be better in the pockets of the needy. Suisindo made good profits, as it had to, since much of the money that came through the front door flowed straight out the back, earmarked for whatever good purpose Yvette had set her heart on. And Kurt, the wisest and most long-suffering of men, smiled and nodded it on its way.

There is a story I must tell you about Yvette, which I heard at first hand from her, though that is no guarantee that it is entirely true. A Scandinavian aid official, enamored of her, invited her to his private island off the coast of Sweden. I am deliberately disguising the man's identity, for he was married and a famous womanizer. Kurt and Yvette, by then in Bangkok, were on their financial uppers. A contract was at stake: would they or would they not win the Scandinavian aid agency's commission to buy several hundred thousand dollars' worth of rice and deliver it to starving Cambodian refugees on the Thai border? Their nearest competitor was a ruthless Chinese merchant who Yvette was convinced, probably on no greater evidence than her intuition, was plotting to shortchange both the aid agency and the refugees. At Kurt's urging, Yvette set off for the Swedish island. The beach house was a love nest prepared for her arrival. Scented candles, she swore, were burning in the bedroom. Her lover-to-be was ardent, but she entreated patience. Might they not first take a romantic walk on the beach? Of course! For you, anything! It's freezing cold, so they must wrap up warm. As they stumble over the sand dunes in the darkness, Yvette proposes a childhood game: *I stand still. So. Now you place yourself close behind me. Closer. So. That is very nice. Now I close my eyes and you put your hands over them. You are comfortable? I, too. Now you may ask me one question, any question in the world, one only, and I must answer the absolute truth. If I do not, I am not worthy of you. You will play this game? Good. I, too. So what is your question?*

His question, predictably, concerns her most intimate desires at this moment. Yvette describes them, I am sure, with brazen falsehood: she dreams, she says, of a certain handsome virile Scandinavian making love to her in a perfumed bedroom on a lonely island in the midst of a turbulent sea. Then it is her turn. She spins him around, and, perhaps with less tenderness than the poor fellow might have expected, claps her hands over his eyes, and yells in his ear, "What is the nearest competitive tender to our own for the delivery of one thousand tons of rice to the refugees on the Thai-Cambodian border?"

But there was another side to Yvette that friends, and foreign journalists par-

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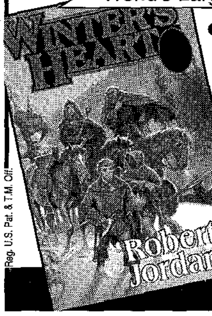

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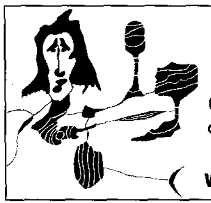

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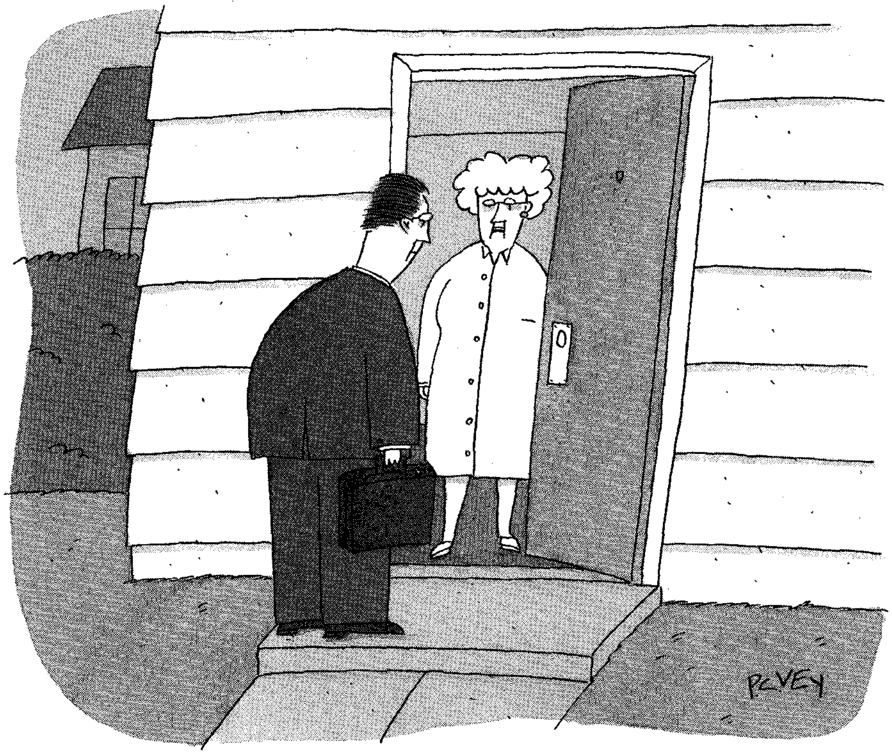
ticularly, ignored at their peril. War, as she was the first to admit, turned her on. She savored danger, rejoiced in it. The drumbeat of gunfire drew her outdoors like rain after a drought. Much as she deplored war's miseries, she relished its freedoms and its hazards. They spoke to the rebel in her, the adventuress, the gamine. They consoled the adolescent waif who, reduced to starvation, had walked the streets of Paris and borne a love child to a man who had deserted her. War, the great leveller, quelled the ogres that haunted her from her childhood years of poverty and abuse. It was in Cambodia that she discovered its fearful attractions, and they never let her go.

By the mid-seventies, Cambodia was an archipelago. Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge held the countryside, while Lon Nol, with vast American support, clung to the towns—the largest of which, Phnom Penh, was ringed by the Khmer Rouge in a radius of five to ten kilometres from the center. The wealthier journalists stayed mostly at one big old hotel with gardens and a swimming pool, and took taxis to the front for thirty bucks a day, rising according to the distance travelled and the hazards they might endure on the way. In the evenings, they filed their stories, which scarcely changed: it was the waiting time. One day, in the company of David Greenway, then of the Washington *Post*, I timorously set out for the battle zone, taking with me for protection a wad of plain postcards on which I habitually made notes, usually afterward illegible, and, of course, the secret persona of my fictional journalist, Jerry. Yvette was determined to join us. She had heard of a wise woman capable of amazing predictions who lived in a Khmer village a few miles into the jungle. Greenway was less than keen, and I was too ignorant to know whether to be keen or not, but when Yvette was determined to have her way there wasn't much you could do about it. As our only Khmer speaker, she gave the driver his instructions. We drove for an age. The road was a dead-straight canyon cut through mile-high teak trees. Tropical rain was falling in sheets. Through the teeming windscreen, we saw a sinister brown lorry roll out of the jungle in front of us. It stopped, blocking our way. Two boys with guns dismounted, inspected us, and returned to the lorry, which rolled back to let us pass. We were not the quarry they were waiting for. Abandoning our search, we returned to Phnom Penh. I was still shak-



"Last time he came out to play with you he went bankrupt."

ing when we reached the hotel, and even Greenway looked a little sallow. But Yvette was in a state of grace. She had touched the high mark. She had lived another day.

Suisindo owned a couple of clapped-out twin-engined cargo planes for shipping its goods from town to town. With Yvette and a Chinese pilot, I flew the delivery round: Battambang, Kampong Chom, and I forget where else. In every town we visited—in every street, it seemed to me—Mme. Yvette was a patron saint, the adoptive mother of delighted children, the quiet friend of the bereaved, the bringer of hope and courage, as well as goodies. But what I remember most clearly is returning to Phnom Penh at night, to land on a bomb-pitted, unlit runway while the city winced with gunfire. I was never quite sure what we carried on the plane, and I don't think Yvette knew, either. But I know that while the plane was slaloming between craters, and I was praying to whatever divinity came fleetingly to mind, Yvette was laughing like a child at a fireworks party.

Phnom Penh fell, and Suisindo with it. Kurt and Yvette moved to Bangkok and tried to start up again. Kurt died, the business ran into problems, and not even the poor Scandinavian on his island could save it. Yvette consigned the business to a manager and headed for Europe, determined to give the rest of her life to the deprived peoples of the world. And, because she was Yvette, that was very soon exactly what she was doing. Inevitably, the wars drew her: Guatemala and Nicaragua; Bolivia and Colombia; the vilest corners of Africa; and most recently Albania. Sometimes she worked for her own relief organization, which she called "Project Tomorrow." It came as no surprise to any of her friends and backers to learn that she could lobby for support like nobody else on earth. She caught the eye of Mme. Mitterrand, and more funds flowed. But, increasingly, she was used by bigger aid outfits, which valued her earthy common sense, her stamina and fearlessness, her growing expertise, and her determination to go, if necessary alone, where few others would dare.

While Yvette was on the trail, it was her pleasure to write or telephone from outlandish places, preferably with outlandish news. When you talked to her in those situations, you listened for other things: *Is she all right? Is she ill? Is she in captivity? Am I supposed to be hearing something I can't hear?* There is a tribal chief in the Congo who has read your last book and doesn't like it, she might say; or this fortune-teller in Somalia has predicted the imminent collapse of the royal House of Windsor. She never knew what time of day or night it was in England, or if she did she never cared. She assumed that my wife and I would be pleased to hear from her at any hour; and of course we were. A couple of times she came to stay with us in Cornwall, where we spend most of our year. When a deal she had struck in Thailand unexpectedly bore fruit, she bought a pretty little farmhouse near Uzès, in the South of France, which was where she had decided to put down her roots. Somehow, between whiles, she contrived to be a marvellous mother of two children.

Two days after I arrived in Kenya to look for my new novel—while it was still at the earliest stages of invention, and the nature of my character Justin's bereavement was still a bit of a puzzle to me—Yvette died in Albania, killed in a car accident, together with David and Penny McCall, of Refugees International, and the Albanian driver, while they were on their way to bring practical comfort to a fresh wave of refugees from Kosovo. In foul weather, their car had driven over a mountain pass and fallen several hundred feet. She was sixty-one. Her ashes were buried with both Christian and Buddhist rites in the garden of her farmhouse. Friends came from America, Cambodia, and Thailand to embrace one another in the afternoon sunlight, to stand alone or in pairs at her graveside. Her two children, grown up and well settled, bore themselves with great dignity. It was the most moving funeral that my wife and I have ever attended. In Washington, you may visit the McCall/Pierpaoli Building. It houses the cause Yvette died for: Refugees International.

And this is where the story becomes disconcerting, even a little unnerving. This is where we touch on the *mystical* part of Yvette—I know no other word for it—on her calm, accept-

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ing attitude toward the forces that she believed commanded her, on her conviction that certain things in her life were ordained, and that by obeying her inmost instincts and reading the signs and following their instructions she was fulfilling her purpose on earth. She wasn't spooky about it, or boastful. She didn't force it down your throat. But she was sure. Even the most skeptical among us—count me as one of them—would have to admit that destiny or fate or simply outrageous coincidence played an extraordinary and persistent part in her life. You didn't have to share her beliefs in transcendentalism or telepathy, but, when it came to explaining the things that happened to her, it helped. A few years back, she had taken a sabbatical to write her autobiography—it was published in France, Germany, and Italy, but an English version, for some reason, never appeared, even though, for a while, Julie Andrews was planning to play her in a movie. Impatient as ever, Yvette kept faxing me passages for immediate comment. She wrote with flair and frankness and great speed. She had no formal education, but she had read a fair amount, and just as she assimilated languages so she took naturally to the pen. But there was a problem. Her insistence that she was a child of destiny scared the professional writer in me, and I urged her to tone it down. Her life was exotic enough on its own, I argued. She told a tale of love and courage and endurance and vocation—what more did she want? She was a woman of the people, not the gods. Did she really have to attribute her achievements to spiritual guidance and the power of meditation? Might she not be setting herself apart from readers who did not share her spirituality? And so on.

Finally, in desperation, I put it to her that she might be risking sales. This appeal to the businessman in her promptly had its effect. Today, I rather wish I had let her write as she believed.

Let me throw in a disclaimer here. I am not trying to talk up my novel with presumptuous claim about its genesis. I am trying to trace the origins of a book that anticipated the events—ahead of their occurrence—that provided it with its motivation. The point being—though it makes my toes curl to admit it—that months before I heard of Yvette's fatal accident I had been contemplating as my offstage central character a woman who had become passionately involved in aid work in Africa, and was dead by the time the story opened. In other words, I was calling Yvette Tessa, and mourning her death ahead of the fact.

And Yvette was aware of what I was up to. I did not reveal to her, so far as I remember, that I proposed to murder Tessa by the time the story opened. But I certainly told her that I intended to use the backdrop of Africa, and that my heroine was somebody as impossible as herself—a notion she received with joy, but also with some skepticism since she knew very well she was unique. And we were going to meet, and she was going to brief me, probably as soon as I had completed my first field trip. She needed to come to Cornwall again, preferably in a big storm. Why had she never experienced a big Cornish storm? she demanded, as if we had somehow failed as hosts. We had already talked about the African friends I must meet, and most of them, predictably, were in the nastiest places. With Yvette, you expected that and, deep down, you wanted it.

And though by age, occupation, nationality, and birth my Tessa was far removed from Yvette, Tessa's commitment to the poor of Africa, particularly its women, her contempt for protocol, and her unswerving, often maddening determination to have her way stemmed, quite consciously so far as I was concerned, from Yvette's example. Yvette, like almost no one else, had opened my eyes to constructive compassion, to putting your money and your life where your heart was, and I was not alone in this. Many of the men and women who embraced one another at the ceremony in the garden of her French farmhouse would have said the same. It was Yvette's work, I now realize, that I wished to celebrate when I embarked on the novel. Probably I realized it from the start, whenever the start was. Probably she did. Yet the novel's motor is her death, in the fiction and afterward in the fact. And it was Yvette's presence that, from the moment of her death, steered me through the book. To all of which Yvette would say, "Of course." ♦

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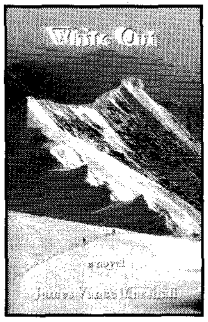

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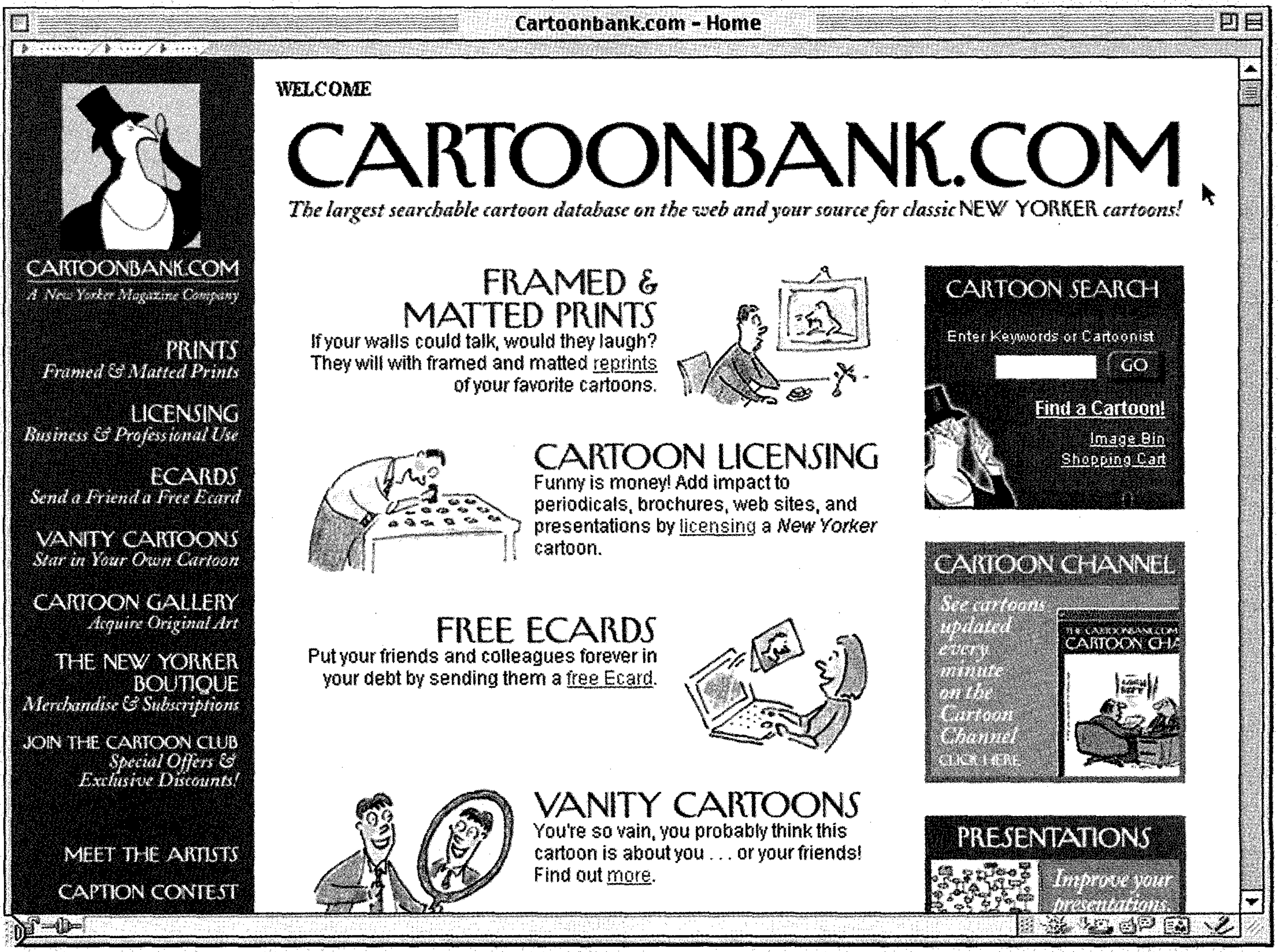

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DEPARTMENT OF CURRENT EVENTS

THE YEAR 2000 QUIZ

BY PAUL SLANSKY

1. Who is Allan Zarkin?

a) The federal agent who aimed that humongous gun at Elián González.

b) The Court TV executive who came up with the idea for a series featuring actual videotaped confessions by murderers, rapists, and assorted other violent criminals.

c) The obstetrician who performed a cesarean section and then carved his initials into the patient's stomach.

d) A consultant hired by the Gore post-election campaign to help figure out how many flags he and Joe Lieberman should stand in front of on television.

2. True or false? A study commissioned by the U.S. Postal Service showed that the phrase "going postal" was a misnomer and that in fact postal employees are no more likely than any other members of the national workforce to be suddenly killed by one of their co-workers.

Elián González

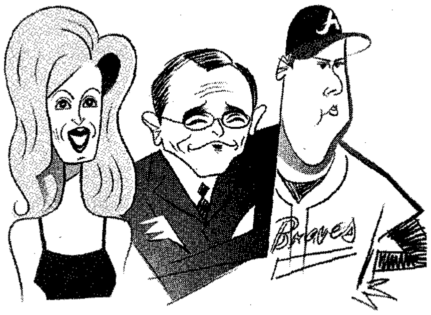
3. Since O. J. Simpson moved to Miami earlier this year, how often has he come to the official notice of Florida police?

a) Three times.

b) Twice.

c) Once.

d)Never. He has been a model citizen.



Darva Conger, Mayor Giuliani, and John Rocker

Who said what?

4. Darva Conger
5. Mike Tyson
6. Rudolph Giuliani
7. Rick Lazio
8. Rudy Boesch
9. Dan Rather

a) "I want your heart. I want to eat your children."

b) "The only reason I'd bring a Bible out here is if I needed toilet paper."

c) "If we say somebody's carried the state, you can take that to the bank. Book it!"

d) "I am now going to try to put myself off of television."

e) "Well, why don't you sign it?"

f) "My emotional state is I'm very sad. And I feel terrible."

Katherine Harris and Strom Thurmond

10. Where did this year's mass suicide by a doomsday cult take place?

a) Sweden

b) Myanmar

c) Uganda

d) Chad

11. How was "Showgirls" screenwriter Joe Eszterhas described by reporters and reviewers during the book tour for his novel "American Rhapsody"?

a) "The scenarist responsible for a dozen or so movies ranging from the bad to the less bad."

b) "A bit like Santa Claus, if St. Nick had been subjected to intense gravitational pressure."

c) "Esztosterone."

d) All of the above.

Rudy Boesch

Match the blurb with the film.

12. "Final Destination"
13. "Frequency"
14. "M:i-2"
15. "Battlefield Earth"
16. "The Cell"

a) " 'The Matrix' meets 'The Silence of the Lambs' in the year's most original cinematic vision."

b) " 'Back to the Future' meets 'Field of Dreams' meets 'It's a Wonderful Life' meets 'The Sixth Sense.' "

c) "Shoves you out over open sky, dangles you in midair, then drops you ten or twelve stories."

d) "Prepare to be blown away!"

e) "It may be a bit early to make such judgments, but [it] may well turn out to be the worst movie of this century."

17. True or false? It was revealed that, in the late nineteen-fifties, the So-

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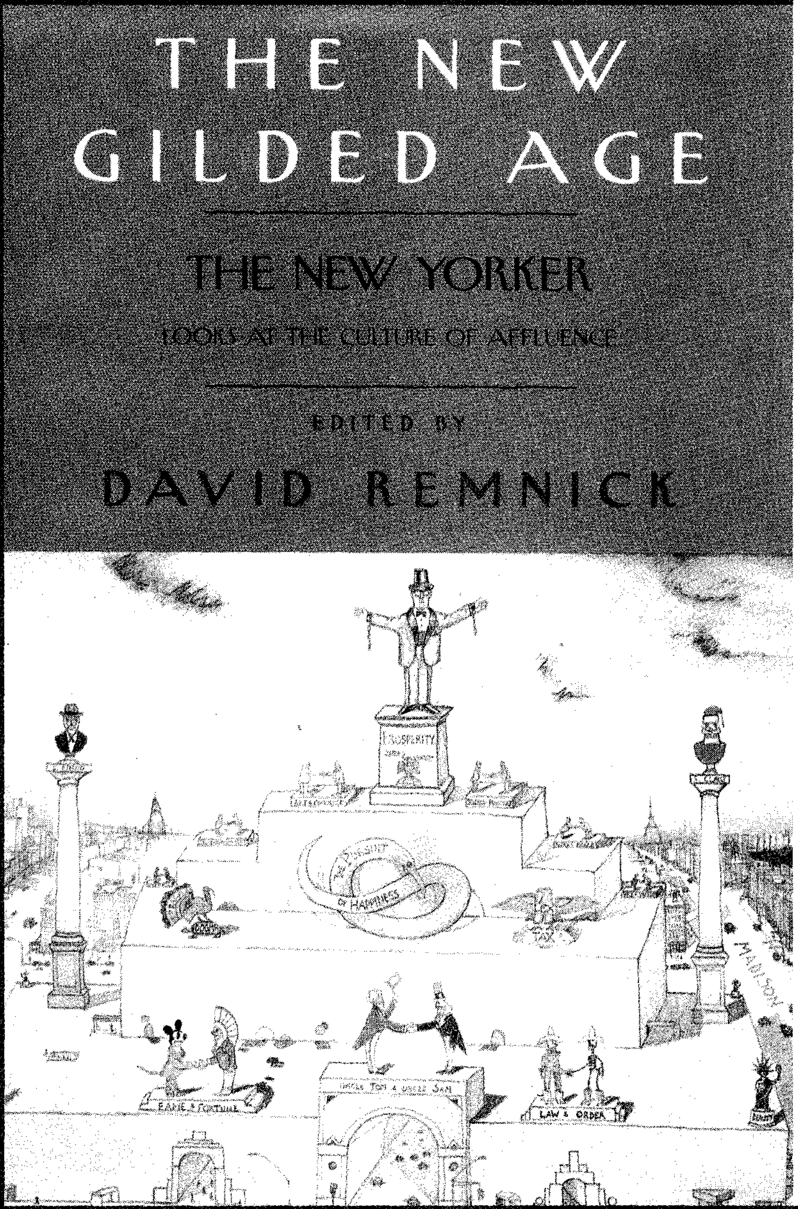

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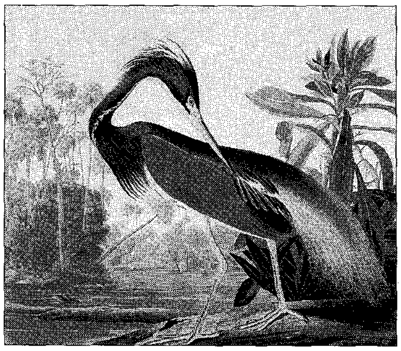

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18. In a full-page ad in the *Times Book Review*, who supplied this blurb: "Working on my own stuff, I haven't had a moment to look into 'Passionate Sex,' but how can others fail to buy it? If the author delivers one-tenth of what is promised in the title, the book will be the bargain of the year."
   a) Jay McInerney
   b) Candace Bushnell
   c) Norman Mailer
   d) Dave Barry

---

19. During the second Presidential debate, what was George W. Bush referring to when he opined, "It's an important continent"?
   a) Asia
   b) Africa
   c) South America
   d) Australia

---

20. Which of these shocking headlines appeared in a major U.S. newspaper?
   a) VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SEEN AS HEALTH ISSUE
   b) MOST TRYING TO SHED WEIGHT DON'T EXERCISE ENOUGH, STUDY FINDS
   c) PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE FOUND HARMFUL TO WOMEN'S HEALTH
   d) SURVEY OF TROOPS FINDS ANTI-GAY BIAS COMMON IN SERVICE
   e) RESTRICTED ENTERTAINMENT IS AIMED AT CHILDREN, REPORT FINDS
   f) All of the above.

---

21. On the eve of his ninety-eighth birthday, what did Strom Thurmond tell a South Carolina newspaper?
   a) That he'd developed a "little crush" on Katherine Harris.
   b) That he hoped "heaven is segregated."

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c) That he was about to turn eighty-eight.

d) That he had a dream that the Democrats suddenly took control of the Senate.

---

22. Who is Barbara J. Pariente?

a) The woman for whom Newt Gingrich left his second wife (for whom he'd left his first wife).

b) One of the Florida Supreme Court Justices who voted to resume the recount.

c) A friend of Linda Tripp's who said of Tripp's plastic surgery, "It looks like she's had a head transplant."

d) The little girl who was first in line to buy the new Harry Potter book.

---

23. Of whom did the *Times* columnist Bob Herbert write, "The degree of self-destruction at work is breathtaking. He is like a military officer directing artillery fire onto his own position."

a) Robert Downey, Jr.

b) Rudolph Giuliani

c) Roger Clemens

d) John Rocker

---

24. Name five of the nine Nixon/Watergate-related figures whose obituaries ran this year.

ANSWERS:

(1) c. (2) True. (3) a. First, he and his girlfriend got into a physical altercation at a Miami hotel. Then, she filed a burglary complaint against him, claiming that he broke into her home and erased a message he'd left on her answering machine. Most recently, after a motorist protested his running a stop sign, O.J. leaped out of his Lincoln Navigator, reached into the man's car, and pulled off his glasses, scratching his face. (4) d. (5) a. (6) f. (7) e. (8) b. (9) c. (10) c. (11) d. (12) c. (13) b. (14) d. (15) e. (16) a. (17) False. America considered doing *it*. (18) c. (19) b. (20) f. (21) c. (22) b. (23) b. (24) Attorney General Elliot Richardson, Treasury Secretary William Simon, Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, Carl Curtis (a staunch Nixon defender in the Senate), Charles Wiggins (a staunch Nixon defender in the House), John Lungren (Nixon's doctor), Charles A. Wright (one of Nixon's defense lawyers), James Vorenberg (a key aide to special prosecutor Archibald Cox, who is still alive), and Frank Wills, the watchman who discovered the Watergate break-in.

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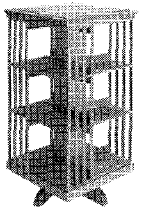

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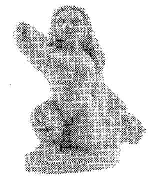

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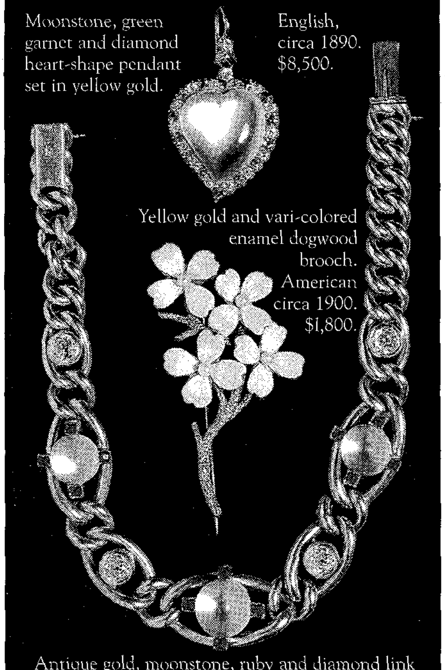

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U.S. JOURNAL

THE WIDOWER'S TALE

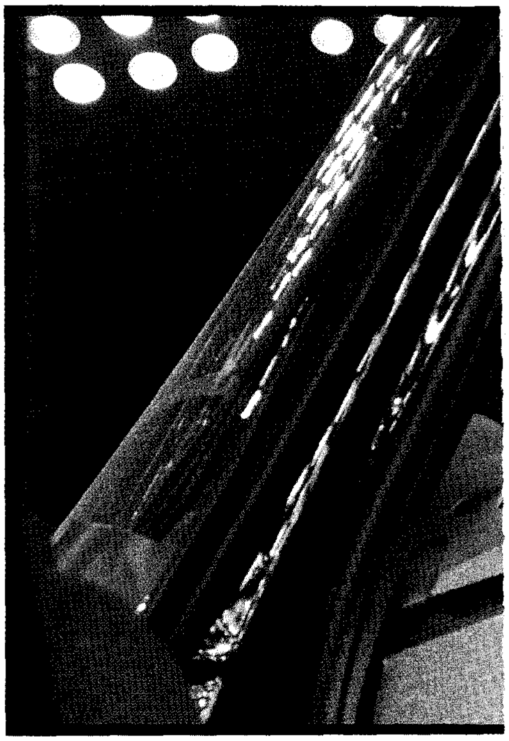
A husband who filed a civil suit against Ford becomes a murder suspect.

BY MARK SINGER

CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE, NEW JERSEY

For a long while, no one seriously challenged the underlying explanation for the sudden death of Tracy Rose Thomas—that is, the version in which the perpetrator was a deer. Very early on a slushy Sunday morning in February, 1997, a motorist on a rural road in Cape May Court House, New Jersey, came upon an automobile mishap. A Ford Explorer sport-utility vehicle had struck a telephone pole and continued another fifty feet before coming to rest in a shallow grassy ditch. The left headlight was smashed, but the right one was still lit, the taillights were lit, the engine was running. Inside, the air-bag system had deployed, and the driver, a woman, and her front-seat passenger, a man, appeared to be unconscious or worse. A well-bundled toddler, strapped into a car seat in the back, was alert and evidently unharmed. On a cell phone, the passerby summoned help.

The call was answered by the police department of Middle Township, a municipality comprising sixteen towns and villages, the largest of which is the quaintly named Cape May Court House, the seat of Cape May County, the southernmost in New Jersey. A detective named William Scott Webster was home at that hour, 2 A.M., awake and monitoring his portable police scanner. When Webster reached the accident site, he'd been preceded by a couple of paramedics, three other police officers, and an investigator from the county medical examiner's office. The driver, displaying no vital signs, had been removed from the car, a sombre task made more difficult by the presence of the air bag but mainly by the inordinate tightness of her shoulder-harness seat belt. Tracy Thomas was a small woman, five feet four inches and slightly built, a fact that was somewhat difficult to discern because she was six months pregnant. By the time she was extricated, placed on a back board on the snow-covered pavement, and draped with a sheet, she'd been dead for at least an hour and a half, and her fetus, a girl, was also dead. The uninjured child in the back seat was Tracy's eighteen-month-old daughter Alix, and the front-seat passenger was her husband, Eric Thomas, a dentist and a respected citizen of Cape May Court House.



Statistics showed that small women like Tracy

Webster spent about an hour at the scene and then went to the emergency room of the local hospital, where Dr. Thomas, who turned out not to have been seriously hurt, and Alix had been delivered by ambulance. Ironically, this had been, according to Dr. Thomas, the family's intended destination. The previous day, he said, Alix had been bothered by a fever, and as the evening progressed it spiked high enough that the Thomases decided she needed to be seen by a doctor.

At the hospital, Dr. Thomas gave Webster and the investigator from the medical examiner's office an account of what had happened. Many more details emerged during an interview that Webster conducted two days later, after Dr. Thomas, having complained of neck pain, had been transferred to and discharged from the trauma unit of a hospital in Atlantic City. The snow that fell the night of the accident was the first significant accumulation of the winter—three inches—but, Dr. Thomas told Webster, neither the road conditions nor the late hour had deterred Tracy. She'd spent most of her life in New England and had plenty of winter-driving experience there and in Germany, where Dr. Thomas had been stationed with the Army for more than three years before the family settled in Cape May Court House.

Thomas were at risk for injuries from air bags—but there was no record of a fatality due to smothering. Photograph by Sylvia Plachy.

Preparing for the trip to the hospital, Dr. Thomas warmed up the Ford Explorer, which was parked in the driveway of the new four-bedroom Colonial they'd moved into two months earlier. Walking to the car, Tracy slipped and fell face down in the snow, quickly recovered, brushed herself off, and got behind the wheel. They'd travelled a little more than a mile when they encountered a deer on the road, a common occurrence in that heavily wooded area. Though Dr. Thomas was wearing glasses, he didn't get a good look at the deer. Still, he felt certain one had been there because he recalled his wife mentioning it—the last thing he heard her say. Tracy was proceeding at a cautious speed, about twenty-five miles per hour, but instead of braking to avoid the deer she veered off the road and into the wooden telephone pole, shearing it. Dr. Thomas's next memory was of a rescuer's flashlight shining in his eyes.

While Dr. Thomas was hospitalized, members of his family arrived, from South Carolina, as did Tracy's parents, Donald and Doris Rose, who lived in Hyannis, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod, and a sister, Wendy Rose Mahdi, who lived in northern New Jersey. Together, the relatives looked after Alix, who, remarkably, was in perfect health; any fever she'd been running had vanished by the time she was examined at the emergency room. In accordance with state law, the Cape May County medical examiner, Dr. Elliot Gross, conducted an autopsy. Two days later, at Dr. Thomas's request—obeying, he said, his wife's wishes—the body was cremated. The death certificate, when it was filed two months later, listed the cause of death as "blunt force trauma with asphyxia . . . motor vehicle accident"—attributable, apparently, to the explosive force and pressure of the air-bag apparatus. The deer in the road didn't merit a mention in the medical examiner's report. Nor, at the time, did any investigator, or for that matter anyone else, suggest that Tracy Thomas had actually been strangled by her husband.

Among the mourners at Tracy's memorial service—a standing-room-only event that the mayor of Middle Township recently recalled as "one of the saddest funerals I've ever attended"—was James Callaway, a dentist whose practice Dr. Thomas had bought in 1995. (An aunt of Dr. Thomas's lived in Cape May Court House, and as he neared the end of his Army tour she had introduced him to Dr. Callaway, who was ready to retire.) When Dr. Callaway set up shop, in the mid-fifties, an African-American professional was an anomaly in that part of southern New Jersey, which lay below the Mason-Dixon Line and had an ambience and social texture markedly different from cosmopolitan, industrial northern New Jersey. Then, as now, blacks constituted about twelve per cent of the population in Cape May Court House, and Dr. Callaway's considerable achievement was to build a thriving practice that catered equally to blacks and whites. "People in this area were just very close-mouthed about race," a white woman in

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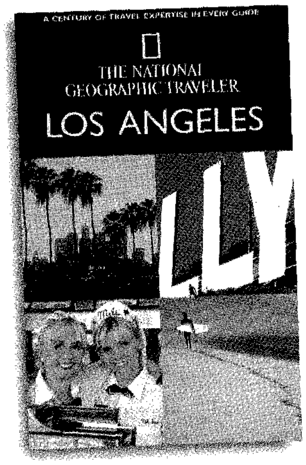
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rural Cape May County who was one of his patients told me. “That was typical of the fifties, before things erupted in the sixties. Even when every place else started having racial unrest, around here we all just pretended to get along. It was very confusing. Back then, it was just hush-hush, like sex—nobody talked about it.”

Cape May County attracts hordes of beachgoers, sailors, and recreational fishermen in the summer but has fewer than a hundred and ten thousand year-round residents, including almost five thousand in Cape May Court House. In a more populous locale, a dentist wouldn't necessarily enjoy the stature that Dr. Callaway did—school-board member, Sunday-school superintendent, ubiquitous figure in various civic organizations. Patients who had trouble paying their bills learned that he possessed a forgiving nature. That charitable spirit, along with a reputation for integrity and plain-spokenness, accounted for the esteem in which he was held. When Eric Thomas took over the dental practice, he seemed to acquire, along with the business's equity and good will, an implicit entitlement to Dr. Callaway's role in the community.

Tracy and Eric Thomas, born in 1959 and 1964, respectively, belonged to the first generation of middle-class African-Americans who regarded upward mobility as an expected reward for hard work. There were, naturally, strings attached—for instance, the peculiar burden of being the sort of well-educated, “clean-cut” black people that a lot of mildly confused white people like to congratulate themselves for befriending—but they had no difficulty adapting to and becoming integrated into the life of Cape May Court House. Eric was personable, outgoing, handsome. The mayor appointed him to the township planning board. A golfer, he was invited to join a country club where he became only the second black member. During the annual career day at the regional high school, he proved to be the most popular speaker—a charismatic young man whose success story encouraged students to believe that by setting goals and persevering they could achieve whatever they wished.

If Tracy hadn't put her own ambitions on hold, in deference to her husband's, she, too, would have qualified as a career-day speaker. According to her sister, she was organized, successful in school, and particularly adept at getting along with other people. “She had the type of personality,” Wendy Mahdi told me, “that if her car broke down, the next thing you know the mechanic's fixing it for free.” After graduating from Skidmore College (where she received ample financial aid; on Cape Cod, her father was a bus driver and her mother was a hotel housekeeper), she moved to Boston. There she worked for a consulting company, earned a graduate business degree from Northeastern University, and met her future husband, who attended dental school at Tufts. They married in 1991, and almost immediately he began to repay the U.S. Army for underwriting his education, a debt that obligated him to four and a half years of military service. Alix was born while they were still in Germany. During Tracy's second pregnancy, she told her sister that once Alix reached school age she intended to go back to school herself, to pursue a law degree. Until then, she had a full-time but unsalaried job as receptionist and business manager in her husband's dental office.

One month before Tracy died—an innocent coincidence, perhaps, or the sort of fact a cynic might dismiss as a film-noir cliché, but a fact nonetheless—Dr. Thomas had increased the death benefit of her life-insurance policy. With the four-hundred-thousand-dollar proceeds, he reduced his mortgage and repaid a twelve-thousand-dollar loan from Tracy's parents, money they'd provided when he was setting up his dental practice. Before long, the thought occurred to Dr. Thomas that his wife's recent demise might yield a substantially greater financial return, and he raised the subject when the Roses came to Cape May Court House to spend time with Alix in October of 1997. Since the early nineties, air bags had been a widely available option in American automobiles. They had saved lives and mitigated injuries, but instances of air bags inflicting injuries and causing deaths had resulted in a number of highly publicized product-liability claims. Dr. Thomas an-

nounced to the Roses that he was contemplating filing a lawsuit against Ford Motor Company, and he asked whether they would care to join as co-plaintiffs. "No, my daughter's dead," Mrs. Rose recalls telling him. "I don't want a cent from that."

During that visit, a tangible unease began to cloud the Roses' dealings with their son-in-law. They were doting grandparents who longed for any opportunity to be with Alix. Mrs. Rose said she hoped the child could join them for Christmas on Cape Cod, but Dr. Thomas said he would be taking her instead to see his family in South Carolina. In general, his behavior seemed odd; at one point he alluded to the possibility that the grandparents might try to kidnap Alix. This and other comments so upset Mrs. Rose that she called a lawyer upon her return home. The lawyer said that Dr. Thomas was still grieving or suffering from survivor guilt, and cautioned her not to take his remarks at face value. Her husband, who was eager to avoid any conflict that might jeopardize access to their granddaughter, also urged her not to overreact.

"I was going to chuck it all, burn my bridges, and go off to Paris to write my novel, but I didn't have enough frequent-flier miles."

• •

The strains worsened over the next several months, complicated, in part, by the fact that Dr. Thomas had a new romantic interest—or, rather, an old romantic interest that had been rekindled. (Eventually, the timing of the rekindling would become a matter of dispute with important legal ramifications.) The woman's name, when Dr. Thomas first knew her, was Stephanie Arrington, and they had been high-school sweethearts in South Carolina. At the time of Tracy's death, Stephanie was living in Texas and married to a man named Sean Haley, a marriage that was coming undone. By the summer of 1998, she had divorced, was living with Dr. Thomas in Cape May Court House, and was pregnant. They married in July. Six months later, Stephanie Thomas gave birth to a son and within a week signed legal papers that formalized her adoption of Alix.

In the context of this domestic shuffle, Dr. Thomas insisted upon ground rules for the Rose family's visits with Alix which disturbed them deeply. Before he would allow her into their home, they had to remove from view any photographs of Tracy. Nor were they even to mention her name in the child's presence. "He warned us that when Alix got home he was going to question her about whether there had been any pictures on the walls," Mrs. Rose told me. "I wasn't going to go along with Eric's demands, but my husband said, 'I'll do anything to see Alix.' So he did take down the pictures."

A line had been crossed, and the Roses and their daughter Wendy began asking themselves questions about Dr. Thomas's demeanor in the immediate aftermath of the car crash and about elements of his account that seemed not to make sense. In late October, 1998, Mrs. Rose and Wendy went to police headquarters in Cape May Court House and, not really certain what they were looking for, requested a copy of the official reports relating to Tracy's death. At first, Mrs. Rose couldn't bring herself to read this material, so she delegated that task to Wendy. The most telling document, in Wendy's mind, was a transcript of Detective Webster's second interview with Dr. Thomas. "As soon as I read that police report, I knew it," she told me. "I said, 'Something's very wrong here.' "

The transcript was filled with hesitations and elliptical phrases that struck the family as evidence of dissembling. The description of Tracy's fall in the snow sounded dubious: "So uh . . . she's clumsy anyway, kinda dropsy, so sure enough she fell outside . . . just slipped on the snow and I think she was reaching for the car." Tracy, her parents and sister knew, was anything but clumsy; she'd studied ballet from an early age and at fourteen had been recruited by the Boston Ballet school, a commitment that required twice-weekly round trips from Hyannis.

Webster asked, "Was she injured during that fall?" and Dr. Thomas replied, "To my knowledge, I don't know."

"Did she hit her face on the ground?"

"I think she did. I think she did. From what I . . . I know I probably . . . looking back, I probably should [have] looked at her a little closer, but, I didn't. So, I . . . I don't know . . . uh."

Dr. Thomas told Webster that Tracy had experienced pregnancy-related dizzy spells, or "blackout" episodes, a revelation that provoked more skeptical questions: Why would a man whose vertigo-prone pregnant wife had just taken a frontal tumble allow her to drive on a snowy night? But never mind that. Tracy, they felt, would never have ridden in the front seat and left her feverish baby alone in the back; she would have been seated next to Alix or cradling her in her arms.

About a month later, Wendy and her parents, having concluded that they

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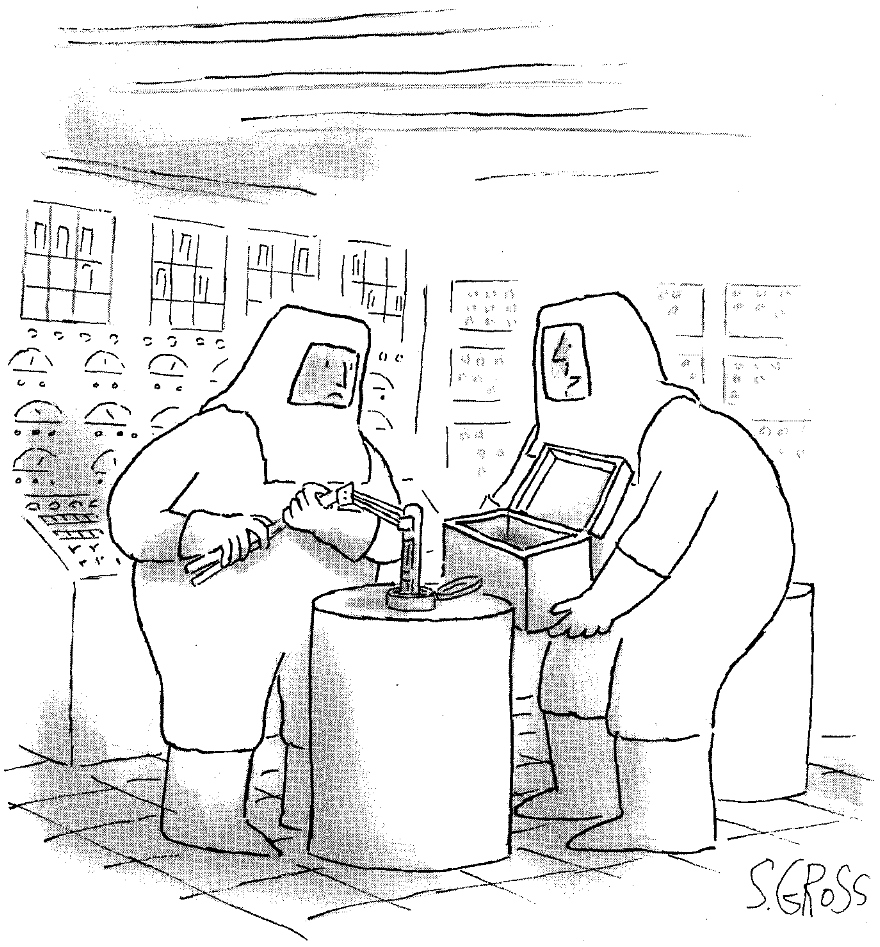
needed a court ruling to protect their visitation rights with Alix, made a trip to Cape May County to talk with a lawyer. That same day, they also met with Webster and forthrightly stated their belief that Tracy's death hadn't been an accident. Webster was courteous and attentive, but explained that there wasn't much he could do. In the light of the medical examiner's report, the case had been closed and the prerogative to reopen it rested with the county prosecutor. Without solid evidence, that wasn't about to happen. (Tracy's ashes had been scattered on a pond on Cape Cod.) They *could* try to hire an independent medical examiner, Webster said, but for starters they would need a lawyer. Could they afford one? No, they explained, they planned to spend that money on an attorney who would represent them in family court. Dr. Thomas had not yet filed his tort claim against Ford, but one was obviously in the works; a few months earlier, a photograph of him and Tracy had appeared in *USA Today*, illustrating a story about air-bag fatalities, and the caption said he was suing the carmaker. Wendy and Mrs. Rose both recall Webster's advising that, under the circumstances, they might consider getting in touch with the right people at Ford.

In early February, 1999, almost exactly two years after Tracy's death, a lawsuit was filed in federal court in Camden, New Jersey, naming as defendants Ford Motor Company and two firms that manufactured crash sensors and air-bag modules used in Ford products. Formally, the plaintiffs were Dr. Thomas, his daughter, and the Estate of Tracy Rose Thomas, and they sought unspecified damages—potentially, it was understood, many millions of dollars. Dr. Thomas's attorneys, a suburban Philadelphia firm that had taken the case on a contingent-fee basis, orchestrated a skillful public-relations campaign, and the litigation immediately attracted media attention that featured him in the role of grieving widower (rather than as a contented newlywed). Statistics compiled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration showed that children, especially, were dying or being seriously injured in air-bag-triggering crashes, and that small women were also disproportionately at risk—though nowhere in the air-bag-mortality database was asphyxia mentioned. In any event, according to one attorney involved in the case, "Tracy became a poster woman for short women dying in air-bag-related accidents."

For several months, as the parties to the suit began taking depositions and plotting tactics, Tracy's family attempted, fruitlessly, to arouse Ford's interest in their suspicions. Routinely, Wendy and Mrs. Rose would call Ford headquarters, in Dearborn, Michigan, and ask for the customer-service or legal departments and, with dismaying consistency, they would wind up talking to functionaries who didn't bother to listen carefully to what they had to say. When, finally, someone did pay attention, Mrs. Rose got a swift follow-up call from William Conroy, a lawyer in Philadelphia whose firm had been retained by Ford.

Last summer, the public-relations momentum—it would be premature to say the over-all advantage—clearly shifted from Dr. Thomas to Ford. With the Cape May County prosecutor watching from the bleachers, Ford, pursuing a best-defense-is-a-good-offense strategy, managed to divert the focus away from questions about air-bag safety and toward the question of why the plaintiff hadn't yet been charged with murder. Early in the litigation, Ford deposed Dr. Thomas. Recently, citing discrepancies between that sworn testimony and statements he'd made to investigators, as well as inconsistencies with other records that Ford has subpoenaed, the company petitioned to depose him again, a move his lawyers have resisted. The goal, of course, is to shred Dr. Thomas's credibility.

Even more problematic for Dr. Thomas is the deposition testimony of the medical examiner, Elliot Gross. Without altering his bottom-line assessment of the cause of death, Dr. Gross conceded that the evidence was ambiguous: "I considered, based on my findings, the death initially as suspicious. I conveyed this to the police." (Detective Webster, who has also been deposed, doesn't recall having such a colloquy with Dr. Gross. Instead, he told Conroy that, in effect, neither he nor the medical examiner had sufficient experi-



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Drink responsibly. (But you know that.) ©2000 Chivas Regal 18 Year Old Worldwide Blended Scotch Whisky 40% Alcohol by Volume (80 Proof) Chivas Bros. Import Co., New York, NY. www.chivas.com ence to evaluate certain aspects of the investigation: "I don't think [Dr. Gross] knew what the injuries would be specific to an air bag.") Yes, Dr. Gross testified, he did discover what are called petechial hemorrhages in Tracy's eyes, as well as hemorrhages in the area of the larynx—both of which, taken together, are typically seen with manual strangulation—but his inquiry was framed by the understanding that the victim had died in a car crash.

Dr. Gross: "If this body, not as Mrs. Thomas, not as February 9th, not as an automobile accident, is brought in and I do this autopsy and I see the hemorrhages in the neck . . . and I see the petechial hemorrhages and that's all I have, I would be very suspicious of the death as a strangulation."

Meanwhile, Ford enlisted its own medical experts, including Michael Baden, a well-known forensic pathologist. (As it happens, a longtime professional rivalry exists between Dr. Baden and Dr. Gross, dating to the seventies and eighties, when both served controversial tenures as chief medical examiner of New York City.) Both Baden and a physician and biochemical engineer named James Benedict, whose specialty is "injury causation and crashworthiness," filed reports that made the same basic points: when an air bag deploys, it stays inflated for less than a second and therefore, by itself, cannot cause asphyxia, which requires compression of the neck for many seconds; asphyxiation could result from a spinal-cord injury, but Dr. Gross's autopsy disclosed no such injury. Dr. Baden's conclusion: "In my opinion, Mrs. Thomas died of compression of the neck by the hands of another."

Dr. Thomas responded to the suggestion that he had killed his wife by amending his legal complaint to include allegations of defamation and intentional infliction of emotional distress. Ford's "Oh yeah?" rejoinder was to take a sworn statement from Sean Haley, Stephanie's former husband, who testified that in early 1997 he reviewed his phone bills and became aware of "consistent calls on a daily basis" to numbers registered to Dr. Thomas. When Haley questioned his wife about out-of-town trips that were ostensibly business-related, she acknowledged meeting Dr. Thomas "on occasions in various locations throughout the country." Ford's next move was to obtain copies of the telephone records for the months preceding Tracy's death. "We're not trying to connect the dots on any of this," Conroy told a reporter for a suburban Philadelphia newspaper, in a masterstroke of disingenuousness. "We just want to get the information." In October, after Ford had documented a hundred and forty phone calls from Stephanie to Dr. Thomas in the three months before the car crash, including seven the day of the accident (Dr. Thomas's phone records have yet to come to light), the Cape May County prosecutor's office announced that it had officially reopened the investigation of Tracy Thomas's death.

Last spring, Eric Thomas submitted to—and, according to his attorneys, passed—two polygraph examinations. Ford has announced its intention to depose the polygraph examiners, even while acknowledging the universal evidentiary inadmissibility of polygraph results.

If, at some future point, Dr. Thomas finds himself confronting a jury of his peers, he could do worse than to draw a panel from among his fellow-residents of Cape May Court House. During four days I spent there last month, almost no one I spoke with was willing to comment on the record. A couple of Dr. Thomas's friends volunteered that his dental practice was prospering, that shortly after Thanksgiving Stephanie had given birth to a baby girl, and that nothing they've read or heard had diminished their lofty opinion of him. I gleaned these comments during telephone interviews; considering how few folks were willing to sit down face to face, I might as well have stayed home.

In small communities, where the prevailing assumption is that everyone knows everyone else's secrets, most of us tend to sympathize with the spectacle of a life conspicuously unravelling, even if that life turns out to be burdened by secrets far darker than the bedevilling knowledge we harbor about ourselves. In Cape May Court House—a tidy red-brick-and-white-clapboard village on the road to nowhere but the beach, a place where the fact that nothing much happens is regarded as a prime virtue—the most common sentiment about Eric Thomas's predicament is that he had the misfortune to pick a fight with the wrong Goliath.

"I think the Ford Motor Company is trying to save themselves money and I don't like it," I was told by one woman who sounded angry that I had even broached the question. "They'll say anything to make a point. I just think it's so cruel."

The phone calls from Texas? The testimony of Stephanie's ex-husband? Was Dr. Thomas or was he not engaged in an adulterous affair at the time his first wife died? "It's possible he was having an affair, but that doesn't make him a murderer."

And if he did do it, *how*? Just the sheer logistics—how did he manage it in such a way that, had he not sued Ford, no one would ever have publicly questioned his story? Seated in her dining room one day not long ago, Wendy Rose Mahdi told me, "I don't know if it was premeditated by him and Stephanie, I don't know if it was the money . . . I just don't know. I don't think Tracy left the house alive. I don't know how he did it. But I know he did it."

One person who I thought might offer useful commentary—or, at the very least, might provide some insight into the pervasive silence in Cape May Court House—was Dr. Callaway, but I showed up too late; he had died the previous month. Then I learned that even if I'd approached him I would have been knocking at the wrong door. His best friend, a retired schoolteacher named John Roberson, told me that Dr. Callaway had played golf with him three or four times a week and "never discussed" Dr. Thomas's travails. I called Dr. Callaway's widow, Barbara, and she delivered the same message.

"If there was something on my husband's mind, he'd let you know what it was," she said. "But this, he just didn't comment on it at all. We expressed our sympathy with Dr. Thomas after the first wife died. We were just in sympathy with him. I had no reason to believe anything else was amiss. When I read about the murder allegation on the front page of the newspaper, I just went right over to his house and told him I didn't believe a word of it and I was angry at Ford and I thought it was cruel and they shouldn't do that. I said, 'It's not fair.' He said, 'It gives me sleepless nights, and this craziness has to be over sometime.' And that was the end of that conversation." ♦

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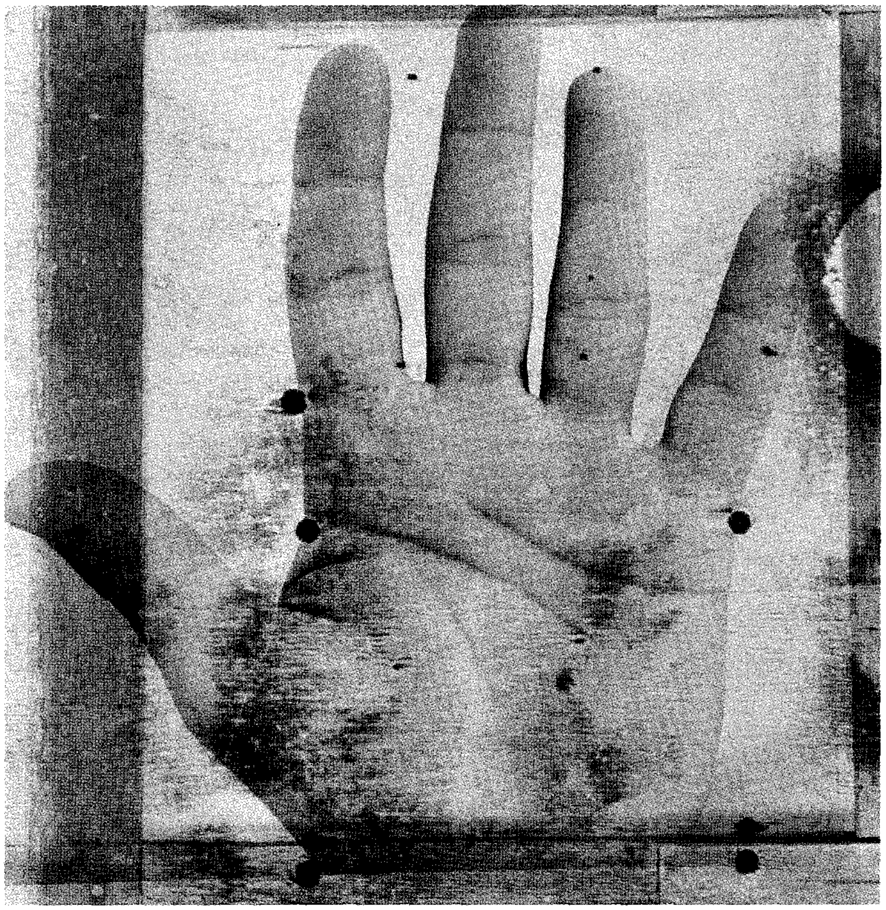
INFLUENCES

BLACK MOUNTAIN, 1977

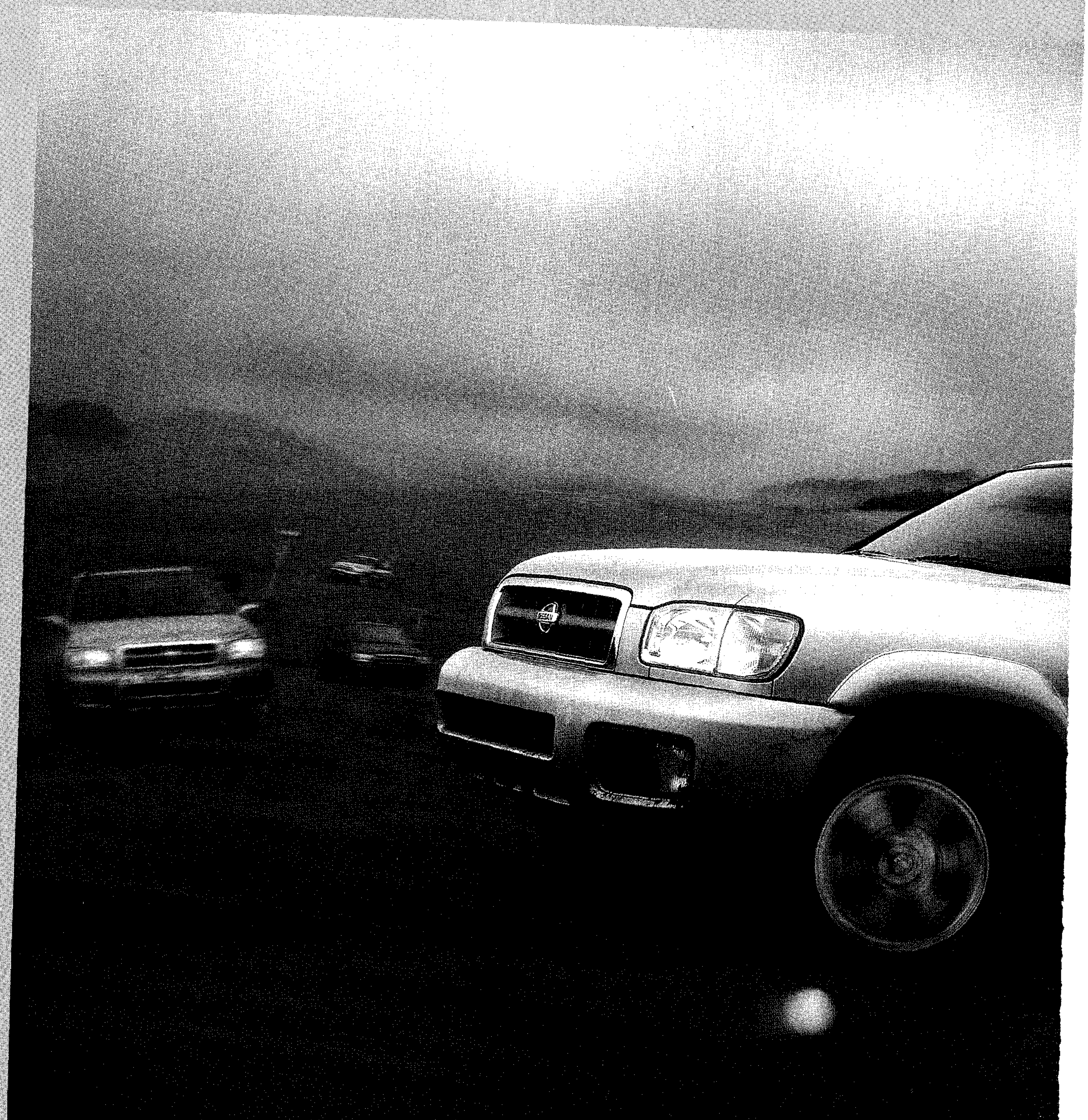
Learning to work with your hands.

BY DONALD ANTRIM



IRAIDA ICAZA

When my grandfather was in his seventies and I in my twenties, we created one of those friendships that are sometimes available between nonconsecutive generations in broken or unhappy families. This friendship was brokered, however inadvertently, and as so many are, by a third party who functioned largely as an object of worry and distress—common cause and a bond between the new friends. The third party was my mother, my grandfather's daughter, a woman whose lifelong pursuit of death was, arguably, a response to severe mishandling by her own mother, my grandfather's wife, a woman who in later age became a nutritionist and appeared merely stern, but who during her early years of motherhood carried out an aggressive campaign against her daughter's body, even going so far as to advocate unnecessary surgeries for her only child. It is, of course, pointless to imagine the implications of a revision in past events or behaviors—to guess at how things might have been. Nevertheless, I hatch these kinds of daydreams constantly. Had my grandfather been less cowed by his wife, less meek and alcoholic—had he been able, in other words, to intercede and protect my future mother—then it is at least likely that she (his young girl) might not have grown up to become the lonely, distrustful, ragingly self-obliterative woman she became; it is unclear, in other words, whether my grandfather and I, during those years right before he began having his heart attacks, the years of his great anxiety over his daughter's well-being, the years when everyone was still alive—it is



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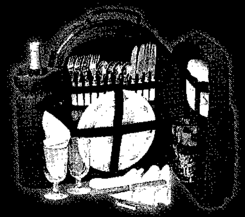

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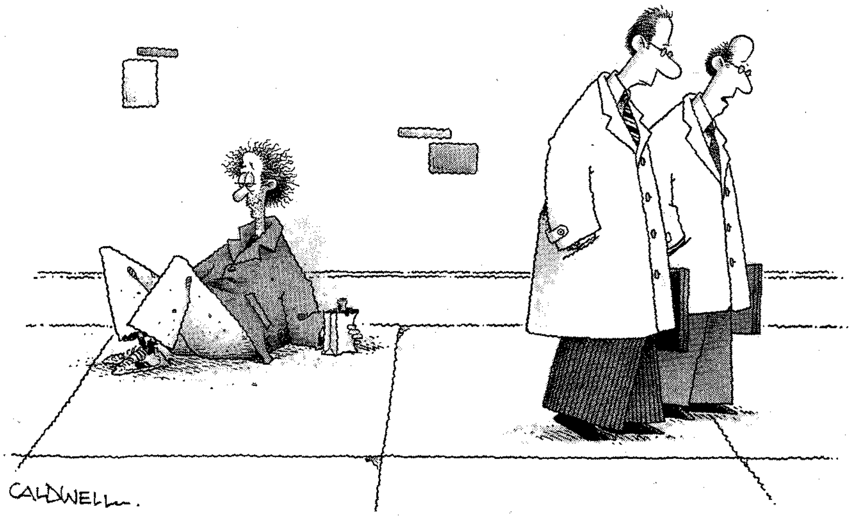


"It makes you stop and think, There, but for the grace of God, goes somebody I fired."

• •

unclear whether my grandfather and I would have been given the platform on which to build, out of guilt, sorrow, need, and respect, our real love for each other.

I was a teen-ager when my grandfather retired from his job as a junior-high-school principal in Sarasota, Florida. He and my grandmother sold their large Spanish-style house on Wisteria Street and moved into a tiny, unattractive condominium, which they hated. After that, they became regular visitors to the Great Smoky Mountains, around Asheville, North Carolina—just east of the part of the world they had both originally come from—and in 1977, the summer I graduated from boarding school, they retired from their retirement and bought a truly derelict bungalow in Black Mountain, intending to restore it and, eventually, move in. Would I like to join them, to spend my summer before college working on the old house? My mother's alcoholism was by then reaching its advanced stages—in a few years she would be forced to attempt sobriety or die—and my parents' fighting, not only with each other but with me, had escalated to nearly heroic levels. Yes, I would be happy to come to North Carolina and work on the house.

And yet, once in Black Mountain, I had a tendency to abandon my grandparents to their painstaking and methodical, stooped-over, Presbyterian labors; every day, I fled the house and drove aimlessly over mountain roads that passed by indigent farms and strange, unpainted churches. I had no concept of work. What was wrong with me? When would my life begin? Looking back on that time, I have an impression of myself performing a kind of fitful, mild-mannered revolt against—what? Anhedonia? Boredom? My family? Or perhaps it was a revolt against Southern Protestantism in general, which I associated with prohibitions and taboos in a variety of forms, perversely expressed in the self-destructive or work-obsessed temperaments of, it seemed to me then, everyone I knew. But protests against the denial of pleasure bring no pleasure. In the spirit of someone with nowhere else to go, I turned the car around and returned to the house in Black Mountain, picked up steel wool or a rag, and found something to scrub.

The day came when we got around to windows. These were painted shut and badly warped. There was, for my grandfather, no question of replacing them; they would be removed, their panes razored clean, and the frames stripped with fine-grade sandpaper, or, if too profoundly rotten, disassembled and rebuilt. This was heartbreakingly deliberate work. The casements were filled with dust, dirt, and dead animals' tiny skeletons. Here, as well, were the windows' rusted pulley wheels and ancient counterweights, canvas sacks stuffed with lead shot and tied off, their ropes broken. I remember my grandfather's old-man hands worrying the wood, delicately touching, like a blind man reading, the surfaces of things; it was slow work that he seemed determined to make slower, as if work of any sort were equivalent to an act of obstinacy. My grandmother's style, by contrast, was all harshness and haste—she attacked her chores. And I remained lazy and sarcastic; the screen door was always slamming behind me. Nonetheless, I was attracted by my grandfather's tremendous patience for what people in romantic moments like to call honest labor. It wasn't that I suddenly understood the value of a job well done. Far from it. It was that for a moment—a romantic moment of my own, destined to resonate and grow in magnitude over the years—I hoped (and this may have been a fantasy that I wanted to have about the man) that my grandfather had something to pass on to me, to teach me. And I imagined (because it did not occur to me to ask him) that what he had to teach me concerned the beauty in labor that remains, at the end of the job, hidden, and that no one except the worker will see or understand or even necessarily appreciate. The windows, when they went back in, slid up or down at a touch.

Years later, when my grandfather was nearing ninety, well after he and I had been brought together by my mother's many hospitalizations, we took drives together along the roads that led over the mountains. Ours were rambling, all-day excursions, little revolts that infuriated my grandmother, who feared for his health. We'd stop on the shoulder in hollows or valleys, where my grandfather took leaks beside the car—frequent urination caused by his heart medication. Always, he drove. Bourbon was stashed in the tire well in the trunk—his guilty, exciting secret. At some point along the way, generally when we were far from home, out beyond Hendersonville, he'd ask the question we lived with every day in our family: Will your mother be all right? Will she be all right? Since by this time he had long supported not only his daughter but, intermittently over the years, her son, his only grandson, the cash-poor so-called writer living up North, I felt that the question might in some ways be a question not about her, or at least not about her alone, but about me. And what could I possibly tell him? That because of a way he'd once gazed at a window frame, then gradually, stubbornly, lovingly sanded smooth its torn, abused edges, I'd be all right? ♦

INFLUENCES

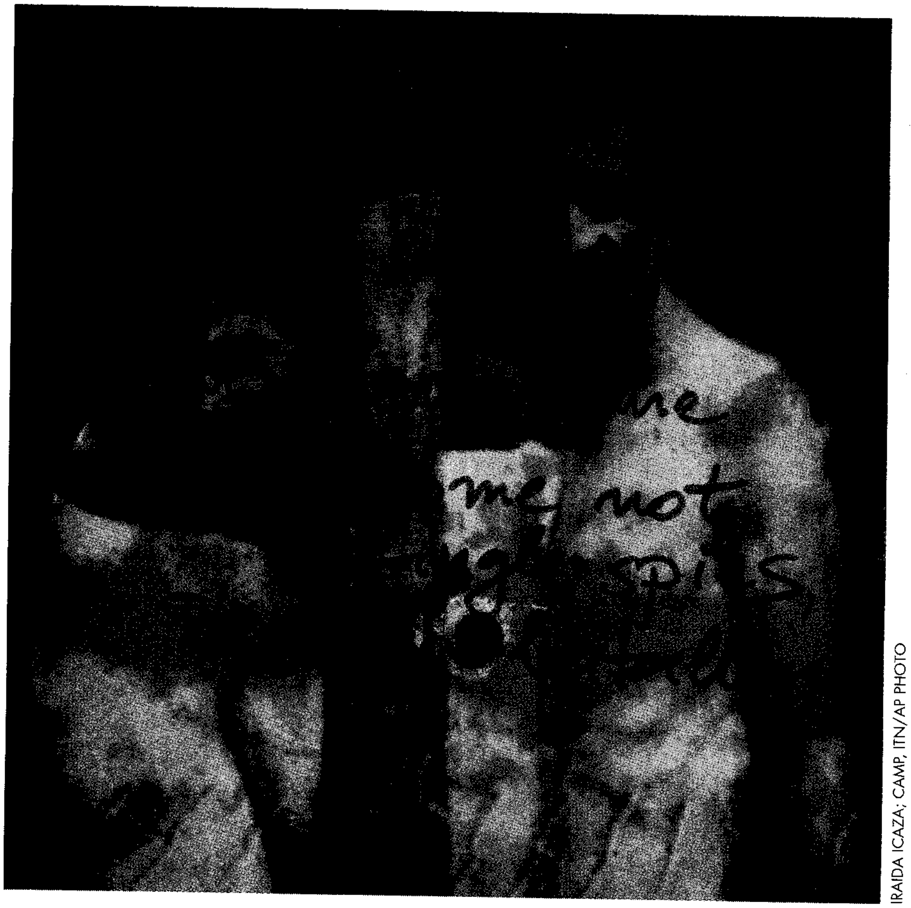
THE BOOK OF MY LIFE

The lessons of a literary mentor.

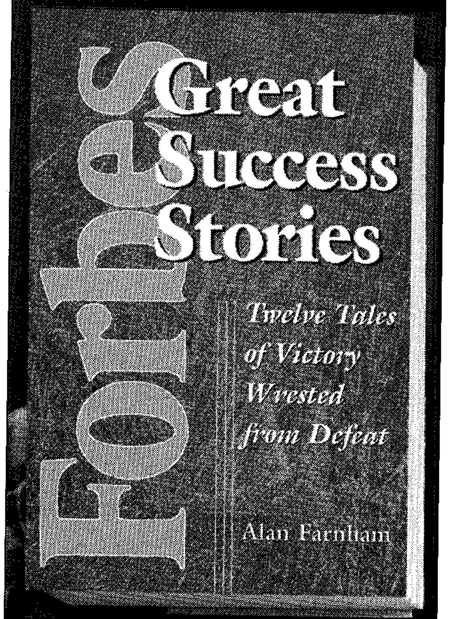
BY ALEKSANDAR HEMON

Professor Nikola Koljevic had the long, slender fingers of a piano player. Although he was now a literature professor—he was my teacher at the University of Sarajevo in the late eighties—as a student he had supported himself by playing the piano in the jazzy bars of Belgrade. Once, he had even had a gig as a member of a circus orchestra—he'd sit at the fringe of the arena, with a Shakespeare tragedy open above the piano keyboard, flexing his fingers, ignoring the lions, waiting for the clowns to come in.

Professor Koljevic taught a course in Poetry and Criticism, for which we read poetry with a New Critical slant—Cleanth Brooks was his guiding light. We learned how to analyze the inherent properties of a piece of literature, disregarding anything outside it. Most of the other professors delivered their lectures devoid of passion, as if possessed by the demons of scholastic boredom, asking for nothing from us. In Professor Koljevic's class, we unpacked poems like Christmas presents, and the solidarity created by our common discoveries filled the small, hot room on the top floor of the Faculty of Philosophy. He was incredibly well read, and he often quoted Shakespeare off the top of his head, in English, which always impressed me; I, too, wanted to have read everything and to be able to quote with ease. He also taught an essay-writing course, where we read the classic essayists, and then tried to produce some lofty-seeming thoughts, but managed only hapless imitations. Still, we were flattered that he thought it even remotely possible that we could write something



IRAIDA ICAZA; CAMP, ITN/AP PHOTO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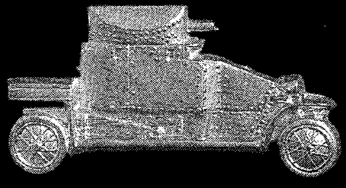

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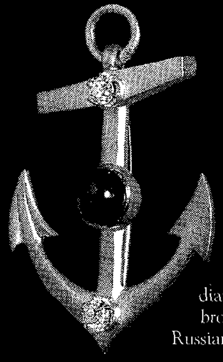

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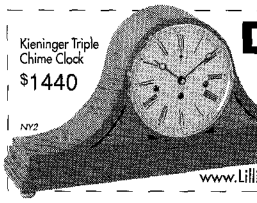

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SUN

Both of them felt it: that day was an island,
strewn with rocks and lighthouses and lovers,
in the generous ocean. On the mainland,
people went about their business, eating
the *Times*, glancing through coffee and oatmeal,
as they walked the gangway into an original dream
of attentiveness, as if a day's pleasure
could concentrate them as much as suffering,
as if the seawall were a banquet without
surfeit, as if they could walk hand in hand
with no one nearby, as if silence and blue
wind became an Atlantic cove to float in
and the air centered itself in small purple
butterflies flitting among the weed flowers.
In the darkening city they returned to,
their privacy completed the cafés of strangers.

—*Donald Hall*

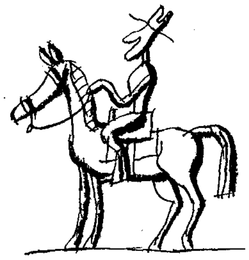
belonging to the same world as Montaigne. It made us feel as if we had been personally invited to participate in the fine, gentle business of literature.

Once, Professor Koljevic told us about the book his daughter had begun writing at the age of five. She had titled it "The Book of My Life," but had written only the first chapter. She planned to wait for more of her life to accumulate, he told us, before starting Chapter 2, and we laughed, still in our early chapters ourselves, oblivious of the plot that was developing around us.

After I graduated, I phoned to thank Professor Koljevic for what he had taught me—for introducing me to the world that could be conquered by reading. Calling him was a brave act then for a student ever in awe of his professors, but he was not put out, and even invited me for a walk by the Miljacka River, to discuss literature as friends. He put his hand on my shoulder while we walked, his fingers cramped like hooks as he held on, for I was considerably taller than he was. It was uncomfortable, but I said nothing. He had, flatteringly, crossed a border, and I did not want to undo the closeness.

Shortly after our walk, I began working for *Nasi Dani*, an independent Sarajevo magazine. At around the same time, Professor Koljevic became one of the highest-positioned members of the Serbian Democratic Party, a virulently nationalist party, headed by Radovan Karadzic, a psychiatrist and a talentless poet, the man who was to become the most wanted war criminal in the world. I attended party press conferences as a reporter, and listened to Karadzic's roaring paranoia and racism, his imposing head looming over our horizon: large, square, topped with an unruly gray mane. And Professor Koljevic would be there, too, sitting next to him: small, solemn, and academic, with large, jar-bottom glasses, wearing a tweed jacket with suède elbow patches, his long fingers crossed loosely in front of his face, as if suspended between prayer and applause. Afterward, I would greet him, dutifully, believing that we at least still shared a love for books. "Stay out of this," he'd advise me. "Stick to literature."

In 1992, I came to the United States for a short trip. When the Serbian attack on Bosnia and the siege of Sarajevo began, I decided to stay here for good. Safe in Chicago, I watched as people in a breadline were massacred, wading in their



own blood, and tried to recognize someone among them. I watched Serbian snipers shoot at the knees and ankles of a man trying to escape from a truck that had been hit by a rocket. On the front pages of magazines, I saw emaciated prisoners in Serbian camps, and the terrified faces of people running down Sniper's Alley. I watched as the Sarajevo library perished in patient, deliberate flames.

The infernal irony of a poet (bad though he may have been) and a professor causing the destruction of a library did not escape me. On the news, I sometimes caught a glimpse of Professor Koljevic standing beside Karadzic, who was always denying—for him what was happening was either "self-defense" or it was not happening at all. Occasionally, Professor Koljevic talked to reporters himself, mocking the questions about rape camps, or dismissing all accusations of Serbian crimes as the unfortunate bad things that happen in every "civil war." In Marcel Ophuls's "The Troubles We've Seen," a documentary about foreign reporters covering the war in Bosnia, Professor Koljevic—labelled as "Serbian Shakespearean"—spoke to a BBC reporter, dispensing spin-phrases in impeccable English and explaining the sounds of Serbian shells falling on Sarajevo in the background as a part of the ritual celebration of Orthodox Christmas. "Obviously," he said, "from the old times, Serbs like to do this." He smiled as he said that, apparently enjoying his own shameless cleverness. "But it is not even Christmas," the BBC reporter said.

I became obsessed with Professor Koljevic. I kept trying to remember the first moment when I could have noticed his genocidal proclivities. I recalled his lectures and the conversations we had had, as if picking through ashes—the ashes of my library. I *unread* books and poems I used to like—from Emily Dickinson to Danilo Kiš, from Frost to Tolstoy—*unlearning* the way in which he had taught me to like them, racked with guilt, because I should have known, I should have paid attention. I had been mired in close reading, impressionable and unaware that my favorite teacher was plotting a vast crime. But what's done cannot be undone. Now it seems clear to me that his evil had far more influence on me than his literary vision did. I was forced to revise the book of my life. My middle chapters have more bloody death scenes than I ever could have imagined. And the writing is infused with an impatience for bourgeois babbling and regrettably tainted with a helpless rage I cannot get rid of.

Toward the end of the war, Professor Koljevic fell out of favor with Karadzic and was demoted from the realms of power. He spent his time drinking heavily, now and then giving an interview to a foreign journalist, ranting about various injustices committed against the Serbian people and himself. In 1997, he blew his Shakespeare-laden brains out. He had to shoot twice, his long piano-player finger apparently having trembled on the unwieldy trigger. ♦

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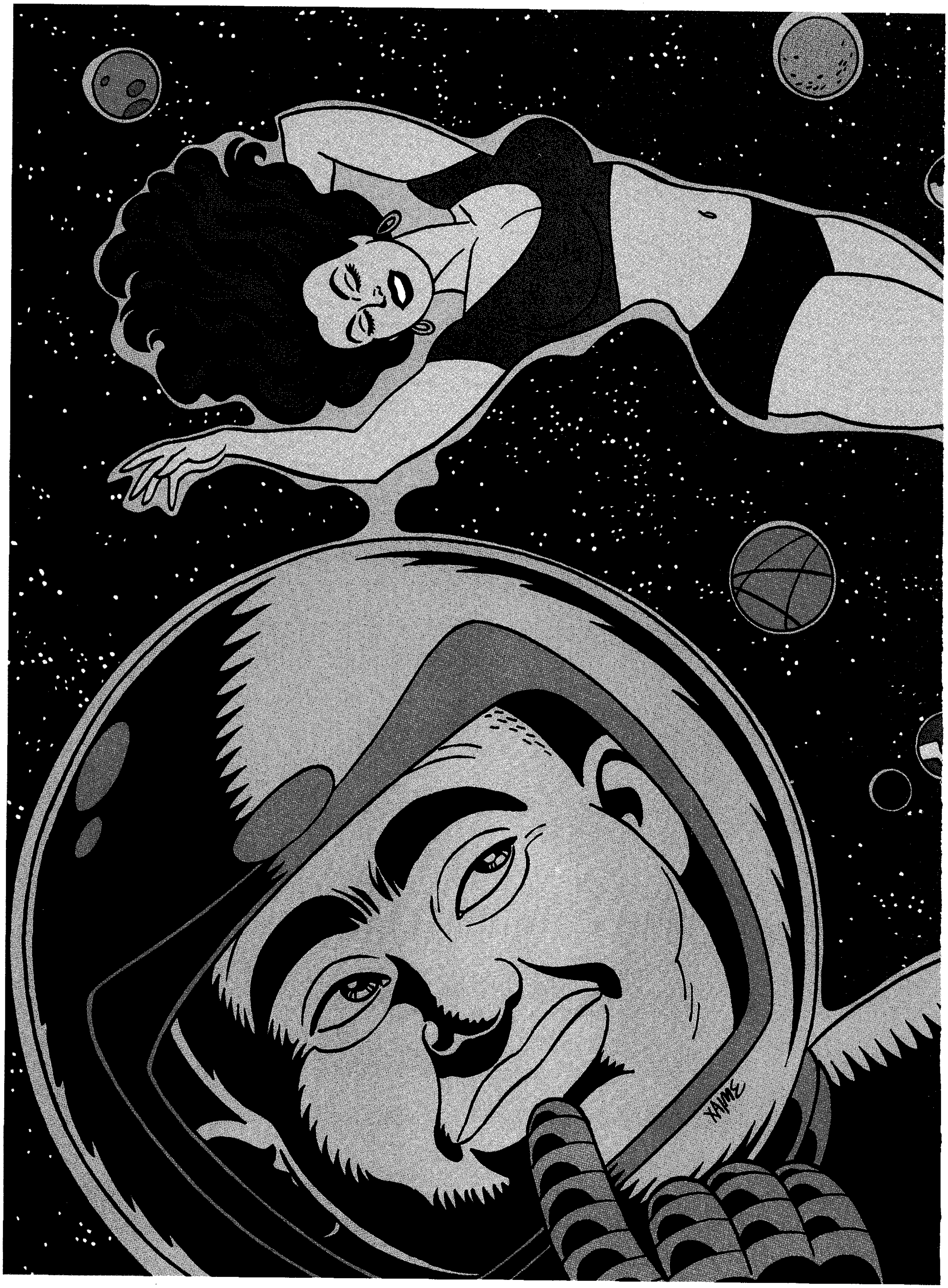

XAIME

FICTION

THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO

BY JUNOT DÍAZ

THE GOLDEN AGE

Oscar de León was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about. He wasn't no player. Except for one time, he'd never had much luck with women.

He'd been seven then.

It's true: Oscar was a carajito who was into girls mad young. Always trying to kiss them, always coming up behind them during a merengue, the first nigger to learn the perrito and the one who danced it every chance he got. Because he was a Dominican boy raised in a relatively "normal" Dominican family, his nascent pimp-liness was encouraged by family and friends alike. During the parties—and there were many, many parties in those long-ago seventies days, before Washington Heights was Washington Heights, before the Bergenline became a straight shot of Spanish for almost a hundred blocks—some drunk relative inevitably pushed Oscar onto some little girl, and then everyone would howl as boy and girl approximated the hipmotism of the adults.

You should have seen him, his mother sighed. He was our little Porfirio Rubirosa.

He had "girlfriends" early. (Oscar was a stout kid, heading straight to fat, but his mother kept him nice in haircuts, and before the proportions of his head changed he'd had these lovely flashing eyes and these cute-ass cheeks.) The girls—his older sister's friends, his mother's friends, even his neighbor, a twenty-something postal employee who wore red on her lips and walked like she had a brass bell for an ass—all fell for him. Ese muchacho está bueno! Once, he'd even had two girlfriends at the same time, his only ménage à trois ever. With Maritza Chacón and Olga Polanca, two girls from his school.

The relationship amounted to Oscar's standing close to both girls at the bus stop, some undercover hand holding, and some very serious kissing on the lips, first Maritza, then Olga, while the three of them hid behind some bushes. (Look at that little macho, his mother's friends said. Qué hombre.)

The threesome lasted only a week. One day after school, Maritza cornered Oscar behind the swing set and laid down the law. It's either her or me! Oscar held Maritza's hand and talked seriously and at great length about his love for her and suggested that maybe they could all share, but Maritza wasn't having any of it. Maritza, with her chocolate skin and gray eyes, already expressing the Ogún energy that would chop down obstacles for her the rest of her life. Didn't take him long to decide: after all, Maritza was beautiful, and Olga was not. His logic as close to the yes/no math of insects as a nigger could get. He broke up with Olga the next day on the playground, Maritza at his side, and how Olga cried! Snots pouring out of her nose and everything! In later years, when he and Olga had both turned into overweight freaks, Oscar could not resist feeling the occasional flash of guilt when he saw Olga loping across a street or staring blankly out near the New York bus stop, wondering how much his cold-as-balls breakup had contributed to her present fuckedupness. (Breaking up with her, he would remember, hadn't felt like anything; even when she started crying, he hadn't been moved. He'd said, Don't be a baby.)

What *had* hurt, however, was when Maritza dumped *him*. The Monday after he'd shed Olga, he arrived at the bus stop only to discover beautiful Maritza holding hands with butt-ugly Nelson Pardo. At first Oscar thought it a mistake; the sun was in his eyes, he'd not slept enough the night before. But Maritza wouldn't even smile at him! Pretended

ILLUSTRATION BY JAIME HERNANDEZ

he wasn't there. We should get married, she was saying to Nelson, and Nelson grinned moronically, turning up the street to look for the bus. Oscar was too hurt to speak; he sat down on the curb and felt something overwhelming surge up from his chest, and before he knew it he was crying, and when his sister Lola walked over and asked him what was the matter he shook his head. Look at the mariconcito, somebody snickered. Somebody else kicked his beloved lunchbox. When he got on the bus, still crying, the driver, a famously reformed PCP addict, said, Christ, what a fucking *baby*.

Maybe coincidence, maybe self-serving Dominican hyperbole, but it seemed to Oscar that from the moment Maritza dumped him his life shot straight down the tubes. Over the next couple of years he grew fatter and fatter, and early adolescence scrambled his face into nothing you could call cute; he got uncomfortable with himself and no longer went anywhere near the girls, because they always shrieked and called him gordo asqueroso. He forgot the perrito, forgot the pride he felt when the women in the family had called him hombre. He did not kiss another girl for a long, long time. As though everything he had in the girl department had burned up that one fucking week. Olga caught the same bad, no-love karma. She got huge and scary—a troll gene in her somewhere—and started drinking 151 straight out of the bottle and was taken out of school because she had a habit of screaming NATAS! in the middle of homeroom. Sorry, loca, home instruction for you. Even her breasts, when they finally emerged, were huge and scary.

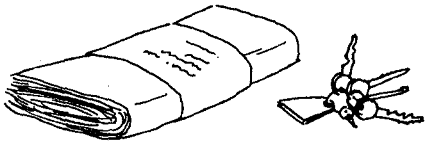
And the lovely Maritza Chacón? Well, as luck would have it, Maritza blew up into the flyest girl in Paterson, New Jersey, one of the queens of New Peru, and, since she and Oscar were neighbors, he saw her plenty, hair as black and lush as a thunderhead, probably the only Peruvian girl on the planet with curly hair (he hadn't heard of Afro Peruvians yet or of a town called Chincha), body fine enough to make old men forget their infirmities, and from age thirteen steady getting in or out of some roughneck's ride. (Maritza might not have been good at much—not sports, not school, not work—but she was good at boys.) Oscar would watch Maritza's getting in and out all through his cheerless, sexless adolescence. The only things that changed in those years were the models of the cars, the size of Maritza's ass, and the music volting out of the car's speakers. First freestyle, then Special Ed-era hip-hop, and right at the very end, for just a little while, Hector Lavoe and the boys.

Oscar didn't imagine that she remembered their kisses but of course he remembered.

THE MORONIC INFERNO

High school was Don Bosco Tech and since Don Bosco Tech was an all-boys Catholic school run by the Salesian Fathers and Brothers and packed with a couple of hundred insecure, hyperactive adolescents it was, for a fat, girl-crazy nigger like Oscar, a source of endless anguish.

Sophomore year Oscar's weight stabilized at about two-ten (two-twenty when he was depressed, which was often), and it had become clear to everybody, especially his family, that he'd become the neighborhood pariguayo. He wore his semikink hair in a Puerto Rican Afro, had enormous Section-8 glasses (his anti-pussy devices, his boys Al and Miggs called them), sported an unappealing trace of mustache, and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded. The Eyes of Mingus (a comparison he made himself one day, going through his mother's record collection; she was the only old-school Dominicana he knew who loved jazz; she'd arrived in the States in the early sixties and shacked up with morenos for years until she met Oscar's father, who put an end to that particular chapter of the All-African World Party). Throughout high school he did the usual ghettonerd things: he collected comic books, he played role-playing games, he worked at a hardware store to save money for an outdated Apple IIe. He was an introvert who trembled with fear every time gym class rolled around. He watched nerd shows like "Doctor Who" and "Blake's 7," could tell you the difference between a Veritech fighter and a Zentraedi battle pod, and he used a lot of huge-sounding nerd words like "indefatigable" and "ubiquitous" when talking to niggers who would barely graduate from high school. He read Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman novels (his favorite character was, of course, Raistlin) and became an early devotee of the End of the World. He devoured every book he could find that dealt with the End Times, from John Christopher's "Empty World" to Hal Lindsey's "The Late Great Planet Earth." He didn't date no one. Didn't even come close. Inside, he was a passionate person who fell in love easily and deeply. His affection—that gravitational mass of love, fear, longing, desire, and lust that he directed at any and every girl in the vicinity—roamed across all Paterson, affixed itself everywhere without regard to looks, age, or availability. Despite the fact that he considered his affection this tremendous, sputtering force, it was actually more like a ghost because no girl ever seemed to notice it.



Anywhere else, his triple-zero batting average with the girls might have passed unremarked, but this is a Dominican kid, in a Dominican family. Everybody noticed his lack of game and everybody offered him advice. His tío Rodolfo (only recently released from Rahway State) was especially generous in his tutelage. We wouldn't want you to turn into one of those Greenwich Village maricones, Tío Rodolfo muttered ominously. You have to grab a muchacha, broder, y méteselo. That will take care of everything. Start with a fea. Coge that fea y méteselo! Rodolfo had four kids with three different women, so the nigger was without doubt the family's resident metiéndolo expert.

Oscar's sister Lola (who I'd start dating in college) was a lot more practical. She was one of those tough Jersey Latinas, a girl soccer star who drove her own car, had her own checkbook, called men bitches, and would eat a fat cat in front of you without a speck of vergüenza. When she was in sixth grade, she was raped by an older acquaintance, and surviving that urikán of pain, judgment, and bochinche had stripped her of cowardice. She'd say anything to anybody and she cut her hair short (anathema to late-eighties Jersey Dominicans) partially, I think, because when she'd been little her family had let it grow down past her ass—a source of pride, something I'm sure her rapist noticed and admired.

Oscar, Lola warned repeatedly, you're going to die a virgin.

Don't you think I know that? Another five years of this and I'll bet you somebody tries to name a church after me.

Cut the hair, lose the glasses, exercise. And get rid of those porn magazines. They're disgusting, they bother Mami, and they'll never get you a date.

Sound counsel, which he did not adopt. He was one of those niggers who didn't have any kind of hope. It wouldn't have been half bad if Paterson and its surrounding precincts had been, like Don Bosco, all male. Paterson, however, was girls the way N.Y.C. was girls. And if that wasn't guapas enough for you, well, then, head south, and there'd be Newark, Elizabeth, Jersey City, the Oranges, Union City, West New York, Weehawken—an urban swath known to niggers everywhere as Negrapolis One. He wasn't even safe in his own house; his sister's girlfriends were always hanging out, and when they were around he didn't need no *Penthouses*. Her girls were the sort of hot-as-balls Latinas who dated only weight-lifting morenos or Latino cats with guns in their cribs. (His sister was the anomaly—she dated the same dude all four years of high school, a failed Golden Gloves welterweight who was excruciatingly courteous and fucked her like he was playing connect the dots, a pretty boy she'd eventually dump after he dirty-dicked her with some Pompton Lakes Irish bitch.) His sister's friends were the Bergen County All-Stars, New Jersey's very own Ciguapas: primera was Gladys, who complained constantly about her chest being too big; Marisol, who'd end up in M.I.T. and could out-salsa even the Goya dancers; Leticia, just off the boat, half Haitian, half Dominican, that special blend the Dominican government swears no existe, who spoke with the deepest accent, a girl so good she refused to sleep with three consecutive boyfriends! It wouldn't have been so bad if these girls hadn't treated Oscar like some deaf-mute harem guard; they blithely went on about the particulars of their sex lives while he sat in the kitchen clutching the latest issue of *Dragon*. Hey, he would yell, in case you're wondering, there's a male unit in here. Where? Marisol would say blandly. I don't see one.

Victoria Roberts

"Yes, as far as I know, songbirds write their own material."

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OSCAR IS BRAVE

Senior year found him bloated, dyspeptic, and, most cruelly, alone in his lack of a girlfriend. His two nerd boys, Al and Miggs, had, in the craziest twist of fortune, both succeeded in landing themselves girls that summer. Nothing special, skanks really, but girls nonetheless. Al had met his at Menlo Park Mall, near the arcade; she'd come on to him, he bragged, and when she informed him, after she sucked his dick, that she had a girlfriend *desperate* to meet somebody, Al had dragged Miggs away from his Atari and out to a movie, and the rest was, as they say, history. By the end of the week, Miggs had his, too, and only then did Oscar find out about any of it, while they were in his room setting up for another "hair-raising" Champions adventure against the Death-Dealing Destroyers. At first, he didn't say much. He just rolled his dice over and over. Said, You guys sure got lucky. Guess I'm next. It killed him that they hadn't thought to include him in their girl heists; he hated Al for inviting Miggs instead of him, and he hated Miggs for getting a girl, period. Al's getting a girl Oscar could comprehend; Al looked completely normal, and he had a nice gold necklace he wore everywhere. It was Miggs's girl-getting that astounded him. Miggs was an even bigger freak than Oscar. Acne galore and a retard's laugh and gray fucking teeth from having been given some medicine too young. What little faith Oscar had in the world took an SS-N-17 Snipe to the head. When, finally, he couldn't take it no more, he asked pathetically, What, these girls don't have any other friends?

Al and Miggs traded glances over their character sheets. I don't think so, dude.

And right there he realized something he'd never known: his fucked-up, comic-book-reading, role-playing, game-loving, no-sports-playing friends were embarrassed by *him*.

Knocked the architecture right out of his legs. He closed the game early—the Exterminators found the Destroyers' hideout right away; that was bogus, Al groused as Oscar showed them the door.

Locked himself in his room, lay in bed for a couple of stunned hours, then got up, undressed in the bathroom he no longer had to share because his sister was at Rutgers, and examined himself in the mirror. The fat! The miles of stretch marks! The tumescent horribleness of his proportions! He looked straight out of a Daniel Clowes comic book. Like the fat, blackish kid in Beto Hernández’s Palomar.

Jesus Christ, he whispered. I’m a Morlock.

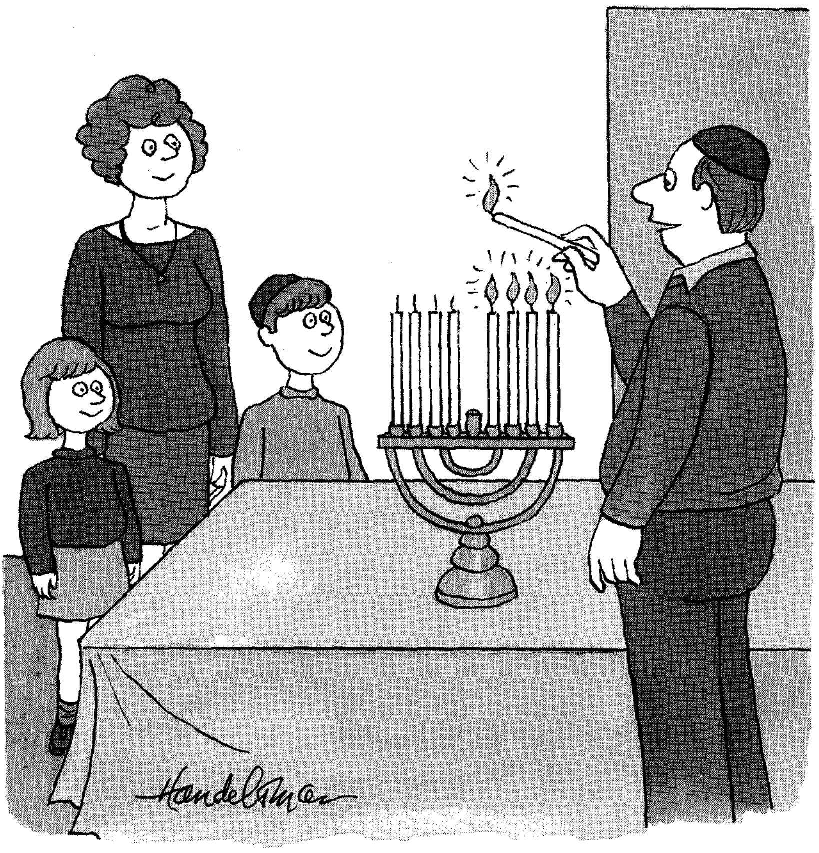
Spent a week looking at himself in the mirror, turned himself every which way, took stock, didn’t flinch, and then he went to Chucho’s and had the barber shave his Puerto Rican ’fro off, lost the mustache, then the glasses, bought contacts, was already trying to stop eating, starving himself dizzy, and the next time Al and Miggs saw him Miggs said, Dude, what’s the matter with you?

Changes, Oscar said pseudo-cryptically.

He, Miggs, and Al were never quite the same friends again. He hung out, saw movies, talked Los Brothers Hernández, Frank Miller, and Alan Moore with them but, over all, he kept his distance. Listened to their messages on the machine and resisted the urge to run over to their places. Didn’t see them but once, twice a week. I’ve been finishing up my first novel, he told them when they asked about his absences.

OSCAR COMES CLOSE

In December, after all his college applications were in (Fairleigh Dickinson, Montclair, Rutgers, Drew, Glassboro State, William Paterson; he also sent an application to N.Y.U., a one-in-a-million shot, and they rejected him so fast he was amazed the shit hadn’t come back Pony Express) and winter was settling its pale, miserable ass across northern New Jersey, Oscar fell in love with a girl in his S.A.T.-prep class. Ana Acuña was a pretty, loud-mouthed gordita who read Henry Miller books while she should have been learning to defeat problem sets. Their fifth class, he noticed her reading “Sexus,” and she noticed him noticing and, leaning over, she showed him a passage and he got an erection like a motherfucker.



“The Internet startup had only enough cash for one more day. But, miraculously, the money lasted for eight days, until more venture capital could be raised.”

You must think I’m weird, right? she said, during the break.

You ain’t weird, he said. Believe me—I’m the top expert in the state.

Ana was a talker, had beautiful Caribbean-girl eyes, pure anthracite, and was the sort of heavy that almost every Island nigger dug (and wasn’t shy about her weight, either), and, like every other girl in the neighborhood, wore tight black stirrup pants and the sexiest underwear she could afford. She was a peculiar combination of badmash and little girl—even before he visited her house, he knew there’d be an avalanche of stuffed animals on the bed—and there was something in the ease with which she switched between these two Anas that convinced him that there existed a third Ana, who was otherwise obscure and impossible to know. She’d got into Miller because her ex-boyfriend Manny had given her the books before he joined the Army. She’d been thirteen when they started dating, he’d been twenty-four, a recovering coke addict—Ana talking about these things like they weren’t nothing at all.

You were thirteen and your mother *let* you date some old-ass nigger?

My parents *loved* Manny, she said. My mom used to cook dinner for him.

He said, That’s crazy. (And later, at home, he asked his sister, back on winter break, Would you let your thirteen-year-old daughter date some twenty-four-year-old guy? Sure, she snorted, right after they killed me. But they better cut my fucking head off because, believe me, I’d come back from the dead and get them both.)

OSCAR and Ana in S.A.T. class, Oscar and Ana in the parking lot afterward, Oscar and Ana at the McDonald’s, Oscar and Ana become friends. Each day, Oscar expected her to be adiós, each day she was still there. They got into the habit of talking on the phone a couple times a week, about nothing, really, spinning words out of their everyday; the first time *she* called *him*, offering him a ride to the S.A.T. class; a week later, he called her, just to try it. His heart beating so hard he thought he would die, but all she did was say, Oscar, listen to the *bullshit* my sister pulled, and off they’d go, building another one of their word-scrapers. By the fifth time he called, he no longer expected the Big Blowoff. She was the first girl outside his family who admitted to having a period, who actually said to him, I'm bleeding like a hog, an astounding confidence that he kept turning over and over in his head. Because her appearance in his life was sudden, because she'd come in under his radar, he didn't have time to raise his usual wall of nonsense or throw some wild-ass expectations her way. Maybe, after four years of not getting ass, he'd finally found his zone, because amazingly enough, instead of making an idiot of himself as one might have expected, given the hard fact that this was the first girl he'd ever had a conversation with, he actually took it a day at a time. He spoke to her plainly and without effort, and discovered that his sharp, self-deprecating world view pleased her immensely. He would say something obvious and uninspired, and she'd say, Oscar, you're really fucking smart. When she said, I *love* men's hands, he spread both of his across his face and said faux-casual-like, Oh, *really*? It cracked her up.

Man, she said, I'm glad I got to know you.

And he said, I'm glad I'm me knowing you.

One night while he was listening to New Order and trying to chug through "Clay's Ark," his sister knocked on his door. At Rutgers, she'd shaved her head down to the bone, Sinéad style, and now everybody, including their mother, was convinced she was a jota.

You got a visitor, she said.

I do?

Yup. But you might want to clean up some, she warned.

It was Ana. Standing in his foyer, in full-length leather, her trigueña skin blood-charged from the cold, her face gorgeous with eyeliner, mascara, base, lipstick, and blush.

Freezing out, she said. She had her gloves in one hand like a crumpled bouquet.

Hey, was all he managed to say. He knew his sister was upstairs, listening.

What you doing? Ana asked.

Nothing.

Like let's go to a movie then.

Like O.K., he said.

When he went upstairs to change, his sister was jumping up and down on his bed, low screaming, It's a date, it's a date, and she jumped onto his back and nearly toppled him clean through the bedroom window.

So is this some kind of date? he said as he slipped into her car.

She smiled wanly. You could call it that.

Ana drove a Cressida, and instead of taking them to the local theatre she headed down to the Amboy Multiplex. It was so hard for Oscar to believe what was happening that he couldn't take it seriously. The whole time the movie was on, Oscar kept expecting niggers to jump out with cameras and scream, Surprise! Boy, he said, trying to remain on her map, this is some movie. Ana nodded; she smelled of a perfume, and when she pressed close the heat of her body was *vertiginous*.

On the ride home, Ana complained about having a headache and they didn't speak for a long time. He tried to turn on the radio but she said, No, my head's really killing me. So he sat back and watched the Hess Building and the rest of Woodbridge slide past through a snarl of overpasses. The longer they went without speaking, the more morose he became. It's just a movie, he told himself. It's not like it's a date.

Ana seemed unaccountably sad and she chewed her bottom lip, a real bembe, until most of her lipstick was on her teeth and he was going to make a comment about it, but he decided not to.

I'm reading "Dune," he said, finally.

She nodded. I *hate* that book.

They reached the Elizabeth exit, which is what New Jersey is really known for, industrial wastes on both sides of the turnpike, when Ana let loose a scream that threw him against the door.

Elizabeth! she shrieked. Close your fucking legs! Then she looked over at him, threw back her head, and laughed.

When he returned to the house, his sister said, Well?

Well, what?

Did you *fuck* her?

Jesus, Lola.

Don't lie to me. I know you Dominican men. She held up her hands and flexed the fingers in playful menace. Son pulpos.

The next day he woke up feeling like he'd been unshackled from his fat, like he'd been washed clean of his misery, and for a long time he couldn't remember why he felt this way and then finally he said her name. Little did he know that he'd entered into the bane of nerds everywhere: a let's-be-friends relationship.

In April, Oscar learned he was heading to Rutgers-New Brunswick. You'll love it, his sister promised him. I know I will, he said. I was meant for college. Ana was on her way to Penn State, honors program, full ride. It was also in April that her ex-boyfriend Manny returned from the Army—Ana told Oscar during one of their trips to Yaohan, the Japanese mall in Edgewater. Manny's sudden reappearance and Ana's joy over it shattered the hopes Oscar had cultivated. He's back, Oscar asked, like forever? Ana nodded. Apparently, Manny had got into trouble again, drugs, but this time, Ana insisted, he'd been set up by these three cocolos, a word he'd never heard her use, so he figured she'd got it from Manny. Poor Manny, she said.

Yeah, poor Manny, Oscar muttered.

Poor Manny, poor Ana, poor Oscar. Things changed quickly. First, Ana stopped being home all the time, and Oscar found himself stacking messages on her machine: This is Oscar, a bear is chewing my legs off, please call me. This is Oscar, they want a million dollars or it's over, please call me. She always got back to him after a couple of days and was pleasant about it, but still. Then she cancelled three Fridays in a row, and he had to settle for the clearly reduced berth of Sunday after church. She picked him up, and they drove out to Boulevard East and parked the car, and together they stared out at the Manhattan skyline. It wasn't an ocean, or a mountain range; it was, at least to Oscar, better.

On one of these little trips, she let slip, God, I'd forgotten how big Manny's cock is.

Like I really need to hear that, Oscar snapped.

I'm sorry, she said hesitantly. I thought we could talk about everything.

Well, it actually wouldn't be bad if you kept Manny's anatomical enormity to yourself.

With Manny and his *big cock* around, Oscar began dreaming about nuclear annihilation, how through some miracle he was first to hear about a planned attack, and without pausing to think he stole his tío's car, drove it to the store, stocked it full of supplies (shooting a couple of looters on the way), and then fetched Ana. What about Manny? she wailed. There's no time! he'd insisted, peeling out. When he was in a better mood, he let Ana discover Manny, who would be hanging from a light fixture in his apartment, his tongue bulbous in his mouth. The news of the imminent attack on the TV, a note pinned to his chest. *I koona taek it.* And then Oscar would comfort Ana and say something like, He was too weak for this hard new world.

Oscar even got—joy of joys!—the opportunity to meet the famous Manny, which was about as much fun as being called a fag during a school assembly (which had happened). Met him outside Ana's house. He was this intense emaciated guy with voracious eyes.

When they shook hands, Oscar was sure the nigger was going to smack him; he acted so surly. Manny was muy bald and completely shaved his head to hide it, had a hoop in each ear, and this leathery out-in-the-sun look of an old cat straining for youth.

So you're Ana's little friend, Manny said derisively.

That's me, Oscar said in a voice so full of cheerful innocuousness that he could have shot himself for it.

He snorted. I hope you ain't trying to chisel in on my girl.

Oscar said, Ha-ha. Ana flushed red, looked at the ground.

With Manny around, Oscar was exposed to an entirely new side of Ana. All they talked about now, the few times they saw each other, was Manny and the terrible things he did to her. Manny smacked her, Manny kicked her, Manny called her a fat twat, Manny cheated on her, she was sure, with this Cuban chickie from the middle school. They couldn't talk ten minutes without Manny beeping her and her having to call him back and assure him she wasn't with anybody else.

What am I going to do? she asked over and over, and Oscar always found himself holding her awkwardly and telling her, Well, I think if he's this bad you should break up with him, but she shook her head and said, I know I should, but I can't. I love him.

Oscar liked to kid himself that it was only cold, anthropological interest that kept him around to see how it would all end, but the truth was he couldn't extricate himself. He was totally and irrevocably in love with Ana. What he used to feel for those girls he'd never really known was nothing compared with the amor he was carrying in his heart for Ana. It had the density of a dwarf motherfucking star and at times he was a hundred per cent sure it would drive him mad. Every Dominican family has stories about niggers who take love too far, and Oscar was beginning to suspect that they'd be telling one of these stories about him real soon.

Miraculous things started happening. Once, he blacked out while crossing an intersection. Another time, Miggs was goofing on him, talking smack, and for the first time ever Oscar lost his temper and swung on the nigger, connected so hard that homeboy's mouth spouted blood. Jesus Christ, Al said. Calm down! I didn't mean to do it, Oscar said unconvincingly. It was an accident. Mudafuffer, Miggs said. Mudafuffer! Oscar got so bad that one desperate night, after listening to Ana sobbing to him on the phone about Manny's latest bullshit, he said, I have to go to church now, and put down the phone, went to his tío's room and stole his antique Dragoon pistol, that oh-so-famous First Nation exterminating Colt .44, stuck its impressive snout down the front of his pants, and proceeded to stand in front of Manny's apartment. Come on, motherfucker, he said calmly. I got a nice eleven-year-old girl for you. He didn't care that he would more than likely be put away forever and that niggers like him got ass- and mouth-raped in jail, or that if the cops picked him up and found the gun they'd send his tío's ass up the river for parole violation. He didn't care about jack. His head contained nothing, it felt like it had been excavated, a perfect vacuum.

Folks started noticing that he was losing it. His mother, his tío, even Al and Miggs, not known for their solicitude, were like, Dude, what the fuck's the matter with you?

After he went on his third Manny hunt, he broke down and confessed to his sister, and she got them both on their knees in front of the altar she'd built to their dead abuela and had him swear on their mother's soul that he'd never pull anything like that again as long as he lived. She even cried, she was so worried about him.

You need to stop this, Mister.

I know I do, he said. But it's hard.

That night, he and his sister both fell asleep on the couch, she first. Her shins were covered in bruises. Before he joined her, he decided that this would be the end of it. He would tell Ana how he felt, and if she didn't come away with him then he wouldn't speak to her ever again.

They met at the Yaohan mall. Ordered two chicken-katsu curries and then sat in the large cafeteria with the view of Manhattan, the only gaijin in the whole joint.

He could tell by Ana's clothes that she had other plans that night. She was in a pair of black leather pants and had on one of those fuzzy light-pink sweaters that girls with nice chests can rock forever. Her face was so swollen from recent crying it looked like she was on cortisone.

You have beautiful breasts, he said as an opener.

Confusion, alarm. Oscar! What's the matter with you?

He looked out through the glass at Manhattan's western flank, looked out like he was some deep nigger. Then he told her.

There were no surprises. Her eyes went soft, she put a hand on his hand, her chair scraped closer, there was a strand of yellow in her teeth. Oscar, she said gently, I have a boyfriend.

So you don't love me?

Oscar. She breathed deep. I love you as a *friend.*

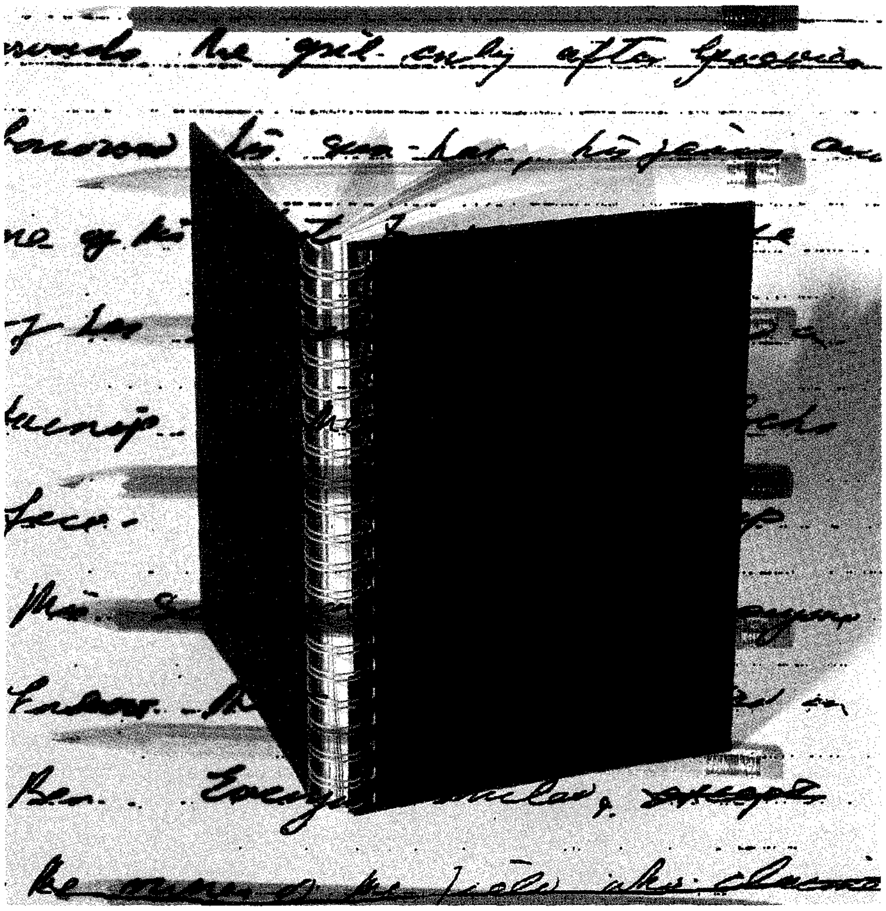
She drove him home; at the house, he thanked her for her time, walked inside, lay in bed. They didn't speak again.

In June, he graduated from Don Bosco. He heard in passing that, of everybody in their section of P-town, only he and Olga, poor, fucked-up Olga, had not attended even one prom. Dude, Miggs joked, maybe you should have asked her out.

He spent the summer working at the hardware store. Had so much time on his hands he started writing a novel for real. In September, he headed to Rutgers, and quickly buried himself in what amounted to the college version of what he'd majored in throughout high school: getting no ass. Despite swearing to be different, he went back to his nerdy ways, eating, not exercising, using flash words, and after a couple consecutive

INFLUENCES BY MURIEL SPARK

MY MADELEINE



IRAIDA ICAZA

Proust's madeleine fetish is well known. He dipped a small cake in a cup of tea; he put it to his lips; and the past came flooding back. He experienced the same effect when he tripped over a cobblestone in a courtyard.

Memory touchstones are most often connected with smells. Who is not moved to recall some previous experience by, for instance, a waft of honeysuckle, or the smoky whiff of a coal fire?

My madeleine is an empty notebook. A friend who accompanied me one time into a stationer's shop remarked, "You examine a notebook like a housewife in the market examining a fish." As soon as I see one (and I acquire many and many), I desire to fill it in. Whenever I am stuck for a new subject or something to write I go to my stock of notebooks and select a new one.

Long ago, in 1951, I saw advertised in the evening paper that a London weekly paper, the *Observer*, was offering a prize for a short story on the subject of Christmas. The prize was two hundred and fifty pounds, a handsome sum in those days. It was a Saturday. I went out and bought a new notebook and then sat looking at the empty pages. My lovely school notebook, all ready to be written in, filled my mind. I started writing a story on my favorite subjects, which at that time were angelology (the fascinating study of the order of angels) and the French poet Baudelaire. To make the story unusual, I placed it in Africa, on the River Zambesi, where I had lived for some years. The result was a story entitled "The Seraph, the Zambesi, and the Fanfarlo" (since reduced to "The Seraph and the Zambesi"). I finished writing it at about three o'clock on the Saturday afternoon, then set about to type it. But I found I had too little typing paper. Saturday afternoon, all the stationer shops were shut. I walked round the streets of London's South Kensington, where I was living at that time, and found nothing open which could possibly furnish me with typing paper. My friends, better off than I, were away for the weekend.

I felt an inner compulsion, an obsession, about finishing the story and mailing it off that day. Then I saw that there was a small art dealer's shop with the owner inside. I had been in the shop before, merely to look at his modern paintings and discuss them, for I was much too poor to buy paintings.

No, he told me, he didn't sell typing paper.

"But you must have some of your own. Do give me, lend me, some," I said. "I need it, for a story."

So he gave me a little sheaf of paper, and I finished and mailed the story. I promised I would buy a picture if I won the prize. It was stipulated that the author's real name should be put in an envelope to accompany the entry, with a pseudonym on the outside. I chose the name Aquarius, my sign of the zodiac. I was lucky, and won the competition.

I bought from my art-dealer friend, for thirteen pounds, a charcoal drawing of a boy listening to a radio, by Stanley Spencer. I bought a dress for six pounds, the first new dress I had had in four years. I gave my mother fifty pounds to pay for my son's bar mitzvah (we were a mixed-origin family, and my son wanted to be a Jew), and another fifty pounds went to another needy author who, strangely enough, began to detest me from that day.

SANTA'S LITTLE ENABLERS
Go ahead, Big Guy! You deserve it!
Who works harder than you? NOBODY!!!

Fridays alone he joined the university's resident geek organization, R.U. Gamers.

SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION

The first time I met Oscar was at Rutgers. We were roommates our sophomore year, cramped up in Demarest, the university's official homo dorm, because Oscar wanted to be a writer and because I'd pulled the last number in the housing lottery. You never met more opposite niggers in your life. He was a dork, totally into Dungeons & Dragons and comic books; he had like a billion science-fiction paperbacks, all in his closet; and me, I was into girls, weight lifting, and Danocrine. (What is it with us niggers and our bodies? Not even Fanon can explain it to me.) I had this beautiful Irish–Puerto Rican girlfriend, a Plainfield girl I couldn't get enough of, a firefighter's daughter who didn't speak a word of Spanish, and I was into clubs like a motherfucker—Illusions, Foxes, Mercedes and Mink (on Springfield Ave. in Newark, the only club on the planet with a Ghettogirl Appreciation Night). Those were the Boricua Posse days, and I never got home before six in the morning, so mostly what I saw of Oscar was a big, dormant hump crashed out under a sheet. When we were in the dorm together, he was either working on his novel or talking on the phone to his sister, who I'd seen a few times at Douglass. (I'd tried to put a couple of words on her because she was no joke in the body department, but she cold-crumbed me.) Those first months, me and my boys ragged on Oscar a lot—I mean, he was a nerd, wasn't he?—and right before Halloween I told him he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, which was bad news for him, because then all of us started calling him Oscar Wao. The sad part? After a couple of weeks, he started *answering* to it.

Besides me fucking with him, we never had no problems; he never got mad at me when I said shit, just sat there with a hurt stupid smile on his face. Made a brother feel kinda bad, and after the others left I would say, You know I was just kidding, right? By second semester, I even started to like the kid a little. Wasn't it Turgenev who said, Whom you laugh at you forgive and come near to loving? I didn't invite him out to no clubs, but we did start going to Brower Commons to eat, even checked out an occasional movie. We talked a little, mostly about girls, comic books, and our corny white-boy neighbors who were pussy asshole cocksuckers. Girls, though, were point zero; they were the world to Oscar. I mean, they were the world to me, too, but with him it was on some next shit. He got around a cute one and the nigger would almost start shaking. Easy to understand; our first month as roommates, he'd told me he'd never kissed one! Never! Jesus fucking Christ! The horror! It wasn't like I couldn't sympathize, but I didn't think acting like a nut around the mamacitas was going to help his case. I tried to give him advice—first off, cristiano, you have to stop gunning on the superbabes—but he wouldn't listen. He said, Nothing else works, I might as well make a fool out of myself.

It wasn't until the middle of spring semester that I ever saw Oscar really in love. Catalyn Sangre de Toro Luperón. Catalyn was this Puerto Rican Goth girl—in 1990, niggers were having trouble wrapping their heads around Goths, period, but a Puerto Rican Goth, that was as strange to us as a black Nazi. Anyway, Catalyn was her real name, but her around-the-cauldron name was La Jablesse. You think I'm kidding? Every standard a brother like me had, this girl short-circuited. Her hair she wore in this black Egypto cut, her eyes caked with eyeliner and mascara, her lips painted black, a Navajo tattoo across her whole back, and none of it mattered, because homegirl was *luminous*. She had no waist, big perfect tits, wore black spiderweb clothes, and her accent in Spanish and English was puro Guayama. Even I had been hot for Catalyn, but the one time I'd tried to mack her at the Douglass Library she picked up her books and moved to another table, and when I tried to come over to apologize she did it again.

Ice.

So: one day I caught Oscar talking to La Jablesse in Brower, and I had to watch, because I figured if I got roasted she was going to vaporize his ass. Of course, he was full on, and homegirl was holding her tray and looking at him askance, like, What the fuck does this freak want? She started walking away, and Oscar yelled out, We'll talk later, O.K.? And she shot back a Sure, all larded with sarcasm.

You have to give it to Oscar. He didn't let up. He just kept hitting on her with absolutely no regard for self or dignity, and eventually she must have decided he was harmless, because she started treating him civil. Soon enough, I saw them walking together down College Avenue. One day, I came home from classes and found La Jablesse sitting on my bed, Oscar sitting on his. I was speechless. She remembered me. You can always tell. She said, You want me to get off your bed? I said, Nah, picked up my gym bag, and ran out of there like a pussy. When I got back from the weight room, Oscar was on his computer. On page one billion of his novel.

I said, What's up with you and Miss Scarypants?

Nothing much. Then he smiled and I knew he'd heard about my lame-ass pickup attempt.

I was one sore loser; I said, Well, good luck, Wao. I just hope she doesn't sacrifice you to Beelzebub or anything.

Later, the two of them started going to movies together. Some narratives never die. She was the first person to get him to try mushrooms, and once, right at the end, when he was starting to talk about her like she was the Queen of Everything, she took him to her room, turned off the lights, lit some witchy candles, and danced for him.

What the hell was this girl thinking?

In less than a week, Oscar was in bed crying, and La Jablesse had a restraining order on his ass. Turns out Oscar walked in on Catalyn while she was "entertaining" some Goth kid, caught them both naked, probably covered with blood or something, and he berserked. Started tearing her place up, and Gothdude jumped butt-naked out the window. Same night, I found Oscar on his top bunk, bare-chested, the night he said, I fucked up real bad, Yunior.

He had to attend counselling, to keep from losing his housing, but now everybody in the dorm thought he was some kind of major psycho. This is how our year together ended. Him at his computer, typing, me being asked in the hall how I liked dorming with Mr. Crazyman.

Would probably never have chilled with him again, but then, a year later, I started speaking to his sister, Lola de León. Femme-matador. The sort of girlfriend God gives you young, so you'll know loss the rest of your life. The head of every black and brown women's progressive organization at Douglass, beloved Phi Chi hermana, blah, blah, blah. She didn't have no kind of tact and talked too much for my taste, but, man, could she move, and her smile was enough to pull you across a room. I began noticing every time she was around, it was like she was on a high wire; I couldn't keep my eyes off her. I asked my boys what they thought about her and they laughed, said, Yo, she looks like a slave. Never forgave any of them for that.

Our first night together was at her place on Commercial Ave., and before I put my face between her legs she dragged me up by my ears. Why is this the face I cannot forget? Tired from finals, swollen from kissing. She said, Don't ever cheat on me.

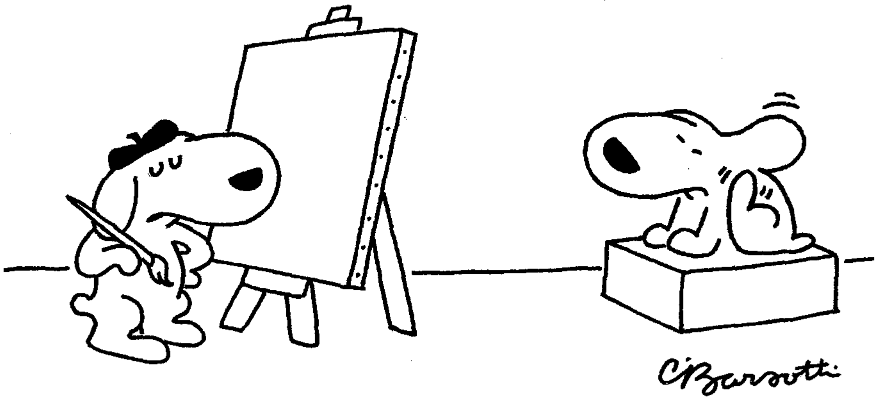
I won't, I promised her. Don't laugh. My intentions were good.

We were still together at graduation, and we took pictures with each other's families—there's even a couple of me and Oscar. We look like a couple of circus freaks: I'm muscle-bound, hands as big as hams, and Oscar's heavy, squinting into the camera like we just pulled him out of a trunk and he doesn't know where the fuck he is.

THE DARK AGE

After college, Oscar moved back home. Left a virgin, returned one. Took down his childhood posters (Star Blazers, Captain Harlock) and tacked up his college ones (Akira and Terminator II). These were the early Bush years, the economy still sucked, and he kicked around doing nada for almost seven months until he started substituting at Don Bosco. A year later, the substituting turned into a full-time job. He could have refused, could have made a "saving throw" versus Death Magic, but instead he went with the flow. Watched his horizons collapse, told himself it didn't matter.

Had Don Bosco, since last we visited, been miraculously transformed by the spirit of Christian brotherhood? Had the eternal benevolence of the Lord cleansed the students of their bile? Negro, please. The only change that Oscar saw was in the older brothers, who all seemed to have acquired the inbred Innsmouth "look"; everything else (like white arrogance and the self-hate of people of color) was the same, and a familiar gleeful sadism still electrified the halls. Oscar wasn't great at teaching, his heart wasn't in it, and boys of all grades and dispositions shitted on him effusively. Students laughed when they spotted him in the halls. Pretended to hide their sandwiches. Asked in the middle of lectures if he ever got laid, and no matter how he responded they guffawed mercilessly. How demoralizing was that? And every day he found himself watching the "cool" kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the femenino, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he must have been seeing himself. Sometimes he tried to reach out to the school's whipping boys—You ain't alone, you know?—but the last thing a freak wants is a helping hand from another freak. In a burst of enthusiasm, he attempted to start a science-fiction club, and for two Thursdays in a row he sat in his classroom after school, his favorite books laid out in an attractive pattern, listened to the roar of receding footsteps in the halls, the occasional shout outside his door of Beam me up! and Nanoo-Nanoo! Then, after thirty minutes, he collected his books, locked the room, and



"Whenever you're ready."

walked down those same halls, alone, his footsteps sounding strangely dainty.

Social life? He didn't have one. Once a week he drove out to Woodbridge Mall and stared at the toothpick-thin black girl who worked at the Friendly's, who he was in love with but to whom he would never speak.

At least at Rutgers there'd been multitudes and an institutional pretense that allowed a mutant like him to approach without causing a panic. In the real world, girls turned away in disgust when he walked past. Changed seats at the cinema, and one woman on the crosstown bus even told him to stop thinking about her. I know what you're up to, she hissed. So stop it.

I'm a permanent bachelor, he told his sister.

There's nothing permanent in the world, his sister said tersely.

He pushed his fist into his eye. There is *in* me.

The home life? Didn't kill him, but didn't sustain him, either. His moms, smaller, rounder, less afflicted by the suffering of her youth, still the work golem, still sold second-rate clothes out of the back of her house, still allowed her Peruvian boarders to pack as many relatives as they wanted into the first floors. And Tío Rodolfo, Fofo to his friends, had reverted back to some of his hard pre-prison habits. He was on the caballo again, broke into lightning sweats at dinner, had moved into Lola's room, and now Oscar got to listen to him chicken-boning his stripper girlfriends almost every single night. Hey, Tío, he yelled out, try to use the headboard a little less.

Oscar knew what he was turning into, the worst kind of human on the planet: an old, bitter dork. He was depressed for long periods of time. The Darkness. Some mornings, he would wake up and not be able to get out of bed. Had dreams that he was wandering around the evil planet Gordo, searching for parts for his crashed rocket ship, but all he encountered were burned-out ruins. I don't know what's wrong with me, he said to his sister over the phone. He threw students out of class for breathing, told his mother to fuck off, went into his tío's closet and put the Colt up between his eyes, then lay in bed and thought about his mother fixing him his plate for the rest of his life. (He heard her say into the phone when she thought he wasn't around, I don't care, I'm happy he's here.)

Afterward—when he no longer felt like a whipped dog inside, when he could go to work without wanting to cry—he suffered from overwhelming feelings of guilt. He would apologize to his mother. He would take the car and visit Lola. She lived in the city now, was letting her hair grow, had been pregnant once, a real moment of excitement, but she aborted it because I was cheating on her with a neighbor. (Our only baby.) He went on long rides. He drove as far as Amish country, would eat alone at a roadside diner, eye the Amish girls, imagine himself in a preacher suit, sleep in the back of the car, and then drive home.

FACE TO FACE

"An excellent question, Sylvia, and I thank you for the opportunity to use 'whilst' in my response."

OSCAR TAKES A VACATION

When Oscar had been at Don Bosco nearly three years, his moms asked him what plans he had for the summer. Every year, the family spent the better part of June, July, and August in Santo Domingo; Oscar hadn't accompanied them since Abuela had screamed out *Haitians!* once and died.

It's strange. If he'd said no, nigger would probably still be alive. But this ain't no Marvel Comics "What if?"—this ain't about stupid speculation, and time, as they say, is growing short. That May, Oscar was, for once, in better spirits. A couple of months earlier, after a particularly nasty bout with the Darkness, he'd started another one of his diets and combined it with long, lumbering walks around the neighborhood, and guess what? The nigger stuck with it and lost close on twenty pounds! A milagro! He'd finally repaired his ion drive; the evil planet Gordo was pulling him back but his fifties-style rocket, the Hijo de Sacrificio, wouldn't quit. Behold our cosmic explorer: eyes wide, lashed to his acceleration couch, his hand over his mutant heart.

He wasn't svelte by any stretch of the imagination, but he wasn't Joseph Conrad's wife no more, either. Earlier in the month, he'd even spoken to a bespectacled black girl on a bus, said, So, you're into photosynthesis, and she'd actually lowered her issue of *Cell* and said, Yes, I am. So what if he hadn't ever got past Earth Sciences and hadn't been able to convert that slight communication into a phone number or a date? Homeboy was, for the first time in ten years, feeling resurgent; nothing seemed to bother him, not his students, not the fact that "Doctor Who" had gone off the air, not his loneliness; he felt *insuperable*, and summers in Santo Domingo . . . Well, Santo Domingo summers have their own particular allure. For two months, Santo Domingo slaps the diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can; airports choke with the overdressed; necks and luggage carrousels groan under the accumulated weight of that year's cadenas and paquetes; restaurants, bars, clubs, theatres, malecones, beaches, resorts, hotels, moteles, extra rooms, barrios, colonias, campos, ingenios swarm with quisqueyanos from the world over: from Washington Heights to Roma, from Perth Amboy to Tokyo, from Brijeporr to Amsterdam, from Anchorage to San Juan; it's one big party; one big party for everybody but the poor, the dark, the jobless, the sick, the Haitian, their children, the bateyes, the kids whom certain Canadian, American, German, and Italian tourists love to rape—yes, sir, nothing like a Santo Domingo summer, and so for the first time in years Oscar said, My elder spirits have been talking to me, Ma. I think I might go. He was imagining himself in the middle of all that ass-getting, imagining himself in love with an Island girl. (A brother can't be wrong forever, can he?)

So curious a change in policy was this that even Lola quizzed him about it. You never go to Santo Domingo.

He shrugged. I guess I want to try something new.

RETURN TO A NATIVE LAND

Family de León flew down to the capital on the fourteenth of June. (Oscar told his bosses, My aunt got eaten by a shark, it's horrible, so he could bail out of work early. His mother couldn't believe it. You lied to a *priest*?)

In the pictures Lola brought home—she had to leave early; her job gave her only two weeks and she'd already killed off all her aunts—there are shots of Oscar in the back of the house reading Octavia Butler, shots of Oscar on the Malecón with a bottle of Presidente in his hand, shots of Oscar at the Columbus lighthouse, where half of Villa Duarte used to stand, shots of Oscar in Villa Juana buying spark plugs, shots of Oscar trying on a hat on the Conde, shots of Oscar standing next to a burro. You can tell he's trying. He's smiling a lot, despite the bafflement in his eyes.

He's also, you might notice, not wearing his fat-guy coat.

OSCAR MEETS A BABE

After his initial two weeks on the Island, after he'd got somewhat used to the scorching weather and the surprise of waking up in another country, after he refused to succumb to that whisper that all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves, the whisper that says You Do Not Belong, after he'd gone to about ten clubs and, because he couldn't dance salsa or merengue or bachata, had sat and drunk his Presidentes while Lola and his cousins burned holes in the floor, after he'd explained to people a hundred times that he'd been separated from his sister at birth, after he spent a couple of quiet mornings on his own on the Malecón, after he'd given out all his taxi money to beggars and had to call his cousin to get home, after he'd watched shirtless, shoeless seven-year-olds fighting each other for the scraps he'd left on his plate at an outdoor café, after the family visited the shack in Baitoa where his moms had been born, after he had taken a dump in a latrine and wiped his ass with a corncob, after he'd got somewhat used to the surreal whirligig that was life in the capital—the guaguas, the cops, the mind-boggling poverty, the Dunkin' Donuts, the beggars, the Pizza Huts, the tígueres selling newspapers at the intersections, the snarl of streets and shacks that were the barrios, the masses of niggers he waded through every day and who ran him over if he stood still, the mind-boggling poverty, the skinny watchmen standing in front of stores with their shotguns, the music, the raunchy jokes heard on the streets, the Friday-night strolls down the Avenida, the mind-boggling poverty—after he'd gone to Boca Chica and Villa Mella, after the relatives berated him for having stayed away so long, after he heard the stories about his father and his mother, after he stopped marvelling at the amount of political propaganda plastered up on every spare wall, after the touched-in-the-head tío who'd been tortured during Balaguer's reign came over and cried, after he'd swum in the Caribbean, after Tío Rodolfo had got the clap from a puta (Man, his tío cracked, what a pisser! Har-har!), after he'd seen his first Haitians kicked off a guagua because niggers claimed they "smelled," after he'd nearly gone nuts over all the bellezas he saw, after all the gifts they'd brought had been properly distributed, after he'd brought flowers to his abuela's grave, after he had diarrhea so bad his mouth watered before each detonation, after he'd visited all the rinky-dink museums in the capital, after he stopped being dismayed that everybody called him gordo, after he'd been overcharged for almost everything he wanted to buy, after the terror and joy of his return subsided, after he settled down in his abuela's house, the house that the diaspora had built, and resigned himself to a long, dull, quiet summer, after his fantasy of an Island girlfriend caught a quick dicko (who the fuck had he been kidding? he couldn't dance, he didn't have loot, he didn't dress, he wasn't confident, he wasn't handsome, he wasn't from Europe, he wasn't fucking no Island girl), after Lola flew back to the States, Oscar fell in love with a semiretired puta.

Her name was Yvón Pimentel. Oscar considered her the start of his *real* life. (She was the end of it, too.)

She lived two houses over and was a newcomer to Mirador Norte. She was one of those golden mulatas that French-speaking Caribbeans call "chabines," that my boys call chicas de oro; she had snarled apocalyptic hair, amber eyes, and was one white-skinned relative away from jabao.

At first Oscar thought she was only a visitor, this tiny, slightly paunchy babe who was always high-heeling it out to her Pathfinder. (She didn't have the Mirador Norte wanna-be American look.) The two times Oscar bumped into her at the local café she smiled at him and he smiled at her. The second time—here, folks, is where the miracles begin—she sat at his table and chatted him up. At first he didn't know what was happening and then he realized, *Holy shit!* A girl was rapping to *him*. Turned out Yvón had known his abuela, even attended her funeral. You I don't remember. I was little, he said defensively. And, besides, that was before the war changed me.

She didn't laugh. That's probably what it is. You were a boy. On went the shades, up went the ass, out went the girl, Oscar's erection following her like a dowser's wand.

Yvón had attended the U.A.S.D. a long time ago, but she was no college girl. She had lines around her eyes and seemed, to Oscar at least, mad open, mad worldly, and had the sort of intense zipper gravity that hot middle-aged women exude effortlessly. The next time he ran into her, in front of her house (he had watched for her), she screamed, Oscar, querido! Invited him into her near-empty casa—Haven't had the time to move in yet, she said offhandedly—and because there wasn't any furniture besides a kitchen table, a chair, a bureau, a bed, and a TV, they had to sit on the bed. (Oscar peeped at the astrology books under the bed and the complete collection of Paulo Coelho's novels. She followed his gaze and said with a smile, Paulo Coelho saved my life.) She gave him a beer, had a double Scotch, then for the next six hours regaled him with tales from her life. It wasn't until midway through their chat that it hit Oscar that the job she talked so profusely about was prostitution. It was *Holy shit!* the Sequel. Even though putas were one of Santo Domingo's premier exports, Oscar had never been near one in his entire life.

Yvón was an odd, odd bird. She was talkative, the sort of easygoing woman a brother can relax around, but there was also something slightly detached about her, as though (Oscar's words now) she were some marooned alien princess who existed partially in another dimension. She was the sort of woman who, cool as she was, slipped out of your head a little too quickly, a quality she recognized and was thankful for, as though she relished the short bursts of attention she provoked from niggers, but didn't want anything sustained. She didn't seem to mind being the girl you called every couple of months at eleven at night, just to see what she was up to. As much relationship as she could handle.

Her Jedi mind tricks did not, however, work on Oscar. When it came to girls, the brother had a mind like a four-hundred-year-old yogi. He latched on and stayed latched. By the time he left her house that night and walked home through the Island's million attack mosquitoes, he was lost. He was head over heels. (Did it matter that Yvón started mixing Italian in with her Spanish after her fourth drink or that she almost fell flat on her face when she showed him out? Of course not!) He was in love.

His mother met him at the door and couldn't believe his sinvergüencería. Do you know that woman's a PUTA? Do you know she bought that house CULEANDO?

He shot back, Do you know her mother was a DOCTOR? Do you know her father was a JUDGE?

The next day at one, Oscar pulled on a clean chacabana and strolled over to her house. (Well, he sort of trotted.) A red Jeep was parked outside, nose to nose with her Pathfinder. A Policía Nacional plate. And felt like a stooge. Of course she had boyfriends. His optimism, that swollen red giant, collapsed down to a bone-crushing point of gloom. Didn't stop him coming back the next day, but no one was home, and by the time he saw her again three days later he was convinced that she had warped back to whatever Forerunner world had spawned her. Where were you? he said, trying not to sound as miserable as he felt. I thought maybe you fell in the tub or something. I thought maybe you'd got amnesia.

She smiled and gave her ass a little shiver. I was making the patria strong, mi amor.

He had caught her in front of the TV, doing aerobics in a pair of sweatpants and what might have been described as a halter top. It was hard for him not to stare at her body. When she first let him in she'd screamed, Oscar, querido! Come in! Come in!

I know what niggers are going to say. Look, he's writing Suburban Tropical now. A puta and she's not an underage, snort-addicted mess? Not believable. Should I go down to the Feria and pick me up a more representative model? Would it be better if I turned Yvón into Jahyra, a friend and a neighbor in Villa Juana, who still lives in one of those old-style pink wooden houses with a tin roof? Jahyra—your quintessential Caribbean puta, half cute, half not—who'd left home at the age of fifteen and lived in Curaçao, Madrid, Amsterdam, and Rome, has two kids and a breast job bigger than Luba's in "Love and Rockets," and who claimed, proudly, that her aparato had paved half the streets in her mother's home town. Or would it be better if I had Oscar meet Yvón at the World Famous Lavacaro, the carwash where a brother can get his head and his fenders polished (talk about convenience!). Would this be better?

But then I'd be lying. This is a true account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. Can't we believe that an

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EASEL BY EDWARD SOREL

FIFTY-FIFTY

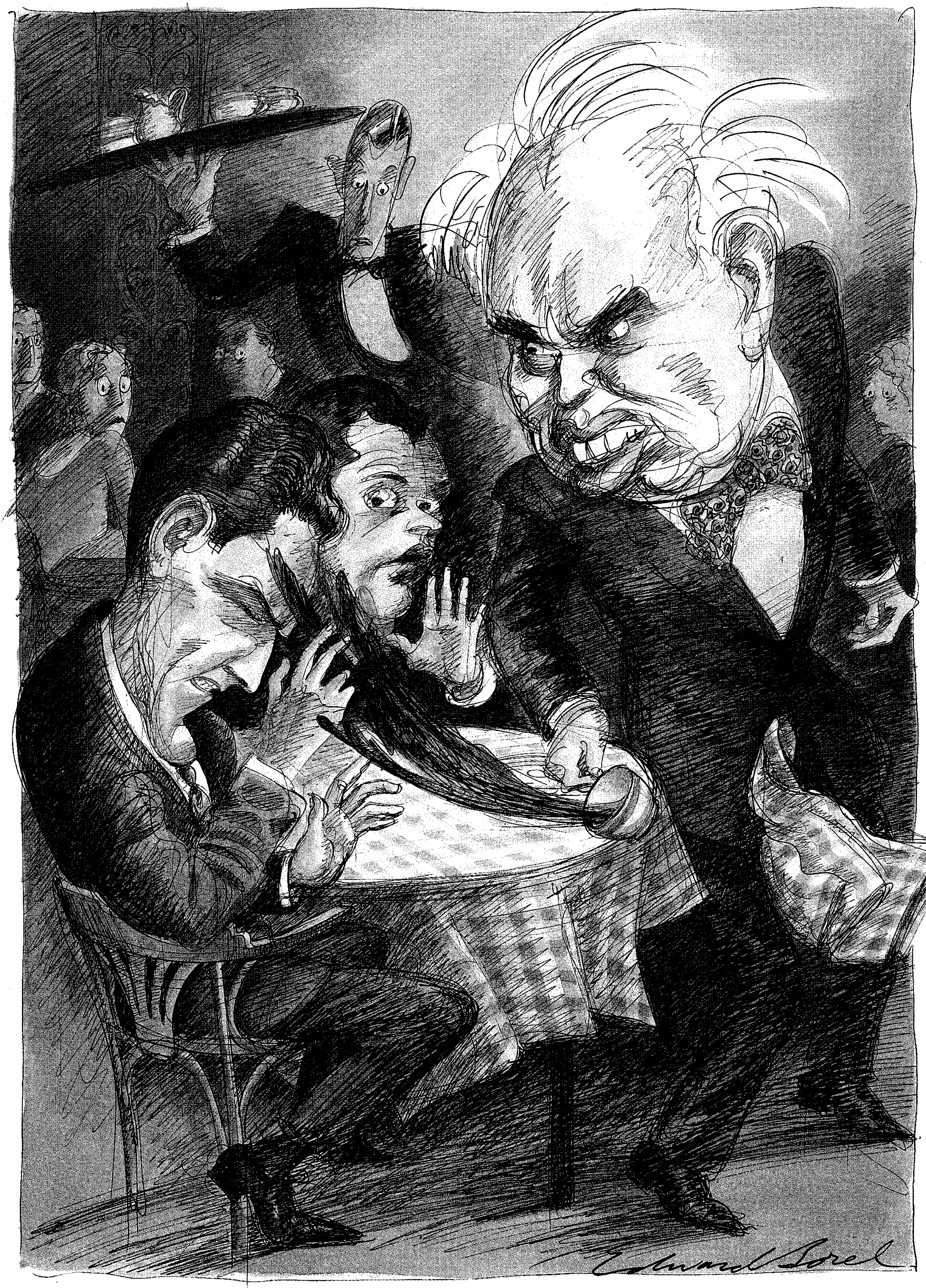
Perhaps because he was so strikingly handsome, the publisher Horace Liveright believed he was destined for success. Nevertheless, after investing in a series of Broadway flops, he was flat broke, and his publishing house, Boni & Liveright, was hanging on by a thread. In 1925, desperate for cash, he suggested to Theodore Dreiser, one of his authors, that they sell "An American Tragedy" to the movies. Dreiser scoffed at the idea. Who would make a picture about a young man who drowns his pregnant girlfriend? "I'll make a deal with you, Dreiser," Liveright persisted. "The first fifty thousand I get for your book in Hollywood, you get complete. After that, we go fifty-fifty." A still skeptical Dreiser shook hands on the proposal.

When Liveright returned from Hollywood, triumphant, he set up a lunch with Dreiser, and phoned young Bennett Cerf, a former staff member, to join them. At the Ritz, as Cerf later recalled, Dreiser was impatient to know why he had been summoned, but Liveright played coy. Lunch first. Waiting for coffee, Liveright at last blurted out his news: "Dreiser, I sold 'American Tragedy'! Eighty-five thousand!"

Dreiser let out an exultant cry. Now he could pay off his mortgage! Maybe an automobile! Liveright caught him up short. "Remember our deal?" he said. "You get fifty and then we split the thirty-five." The author glared at the editor. "Do you mean to tell me you're going to take seventeen thousand five hundred dollars of *my* money?" "You didn't think I'd sell your book at all!" Liveright bellowed as the waiter served the coffee. Enraged, Dreiser seized his cup, flung the steaming brew directly at his editor, and marched out.

Mopping himself up, Liveright turned to his shocked protégé. "Bennett, let this be a lesson to you. Every author is a son of a bitch!"

—*E. S.*


Edward Sorel

Yvón can exist and that a brother like Oscar might be due a little luck after twenty-three years?

This is your chance. If yes, continue. If no, return to the Matrix.

THE GIRL FROM SABANA IGLESIA

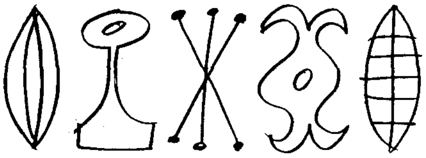
In their photos, Yvón looks young. It's her smile and the way she perks up her body for every shot as if she's presenting herself to the world, as if she's saying, ta-da, here I am, take it or leave it. It doesn't hurt that she's barely five feet tall or that she doesn't weigh nothing. She dressed young, too, but she was a solid thirty-six, a perfect age for anybody but a puta. In the closeups, you can see the crow's-feet, and the little belly she complains all the time about, and the way her breasts and her ass are starting to lose their swell, which was why, she said, she had to be in the gym five days a week. When you're sixteen, a body like this is free; when you're forty—pffft!—it's a full-time occupation. The third time Oscar came over, Yvón doubled up on the Scotches again and then took down her photo albums from the closet and showed him all the pictures of herself when she was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, always on a beach, always in an eighties bikini, always smiling, always with her arms around some middle-aged eighties yakub. Looking at those old hairy blancos, Oscar couldn't help but feel hopeful. Each photo had a date and a place at the bottom, and this was how he was able to follow Yvón's puta's progress through Italy, Portugal, and Spain. I was so beautiful in those days, she said wistfully. It was true—her smile could have put out a sun, but Oscar didn't think she was any less fine now; the slight declensions in her appearance only seemed to add to her lustre and he told her so.

You're so sweet, mi amor. She knocked back another double and rasped, What's your sign?

How lovesick he became! He began to go over to her house nearly every day, even when he knew she was working, just in case she was sick or decided to quit the profession so she could marry him. The gates of his heart had swung open and he felt light on his feet, he felt weightless, he felt lithe. His moms steady gave him shit, told him that not even God loves a puta. Yeah, his tío laughed, but everybody knows that God loves a puto. His tío seemed thrilled that he no longer had a pájaro for a nephew. I can't believe it, he said proudly. The palomo is finally a man. He put Oscar's neck in the New Jersey State Police patented niggerkiller lock. When did it happen? What was the date? I want to play that número as soon I get home.

Here we go again: Oscar and Yvón at her house, Oscar and Yvón at the movies, Oscar and Yvón at the beach, Oscar and Yvón talking, voluminously. She told him about her two sons, Sterling and Perfecto, who lived with their grandparents in Puerto Rico, who she saw only on holidays. She told him about the two abortions she had, which she called Marisol and Pepita, and about the time she'd been jailed in Madrid and how hard it was to sell your ass, and asked, Can something be impossible and not impossible at once? She told him about her Dominican boyfriend, the Capitán, and her foreign boyfriends, the Italian, the German, and the Canadian, the three benditos, how they each visited her on different months. You're lucky they all have families, she said, or I'd have been working this whole summer. (He wanted to ask her not to talk about any of these dudes, but she would only have laughed.)

Maybe we should get married, he said once, not joking, and she said, I make a terrible wife. He was around so often that he even got to see her in a couple of her notorious "moods," when her alien princess took over and she became very cold and uncommunicative and called him an idiot americano for spilling his beer. On these days, she threw herself into bed and didn't want to do anything. Hard to be around her, but he would convince her to see a movie and afterward she'd be a little easier. She'd take him to an Italian restaurant, and no matter how much her mood had improved she'd insist on drinking herself ridiculous—so bad he'd have to put her in the truck and drive her home through a city he did not know. (Early on, he hit on a great scheme: he called Clives, the evangelical taxista his family always used, who would swing by—no sweat—and lead him home.) When he drove, she always put her head in his lap and talked to him, sometimes in Italian, sometimes in Spanish, sometimes sweet, sometimes not, and having her mouth so close to his nuts was finer than your best yesterday.



Oh, they got close, all right, but we have to ask the hard questions: Did they ever kiss in her Pathfinder? Did he ever put his hands up her super-short skirt? Did she ever push up against him and say his name in a throaty whisper? Did they ever fuck?

Of course not. Miracles go only so far. He watched her for the signs that would tell him she loved him. He began to suspect that it might not happen this summer, but already he had plans to come back for Thanksgiving and then for Christmas. When he told her, she looked at him strangely and said only his name, Oscar, a little sadly.

She liked him, it was obvious. It seemed to Oscar that he was one of her few real friends. Outside the boyfriends, foreign and domestic, outside her psychiatrist sister in San Cristóbal and her ailing mother in Sabana Iglesia, her life seemed as spare as, say, her house.

Travel light, was all she ever said about the house when he suggested buying her a lamp or something, and he suspected that she would have said the same thing about having more friends. He knew, of course, that he wasn't her only visitor. One day, he found three discarded condom foils on the floor and asked, Are you having trouble with incubuses? She smiled. This is one man who doesn't know the word quit.

Poor Oscar. At night he dreamed that his rocket ship, the Hijo de Sacrificio, was up and off but that it was heading for the Ana Acuña Barrier at the speed of light.

OSCAR AT THE RUBICON

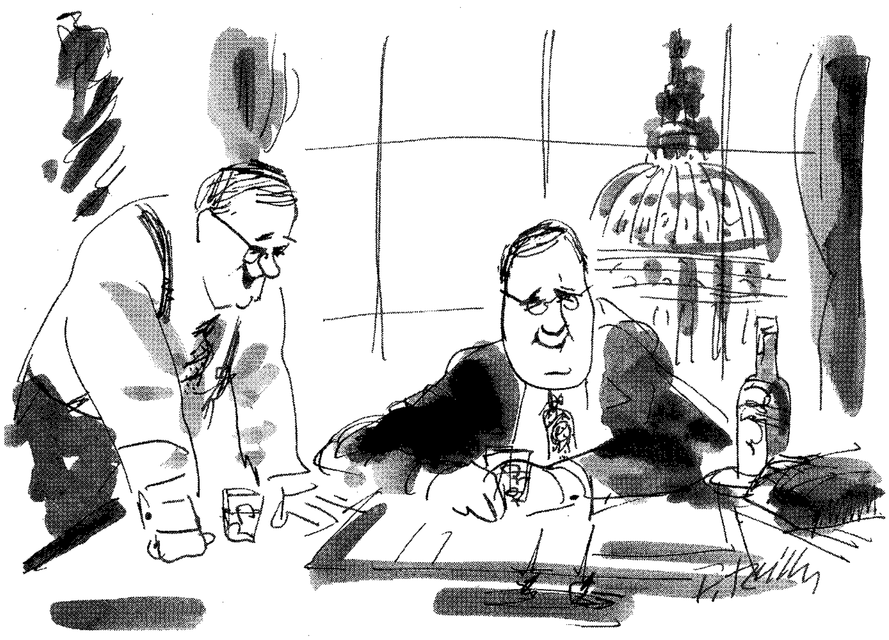
At the beginning of August, Yvón started mentioning her ex-boyfriend the Capitán a lot more. Seems he'd heard about Oscar and wanted to meet him. He's really jealous, Yvón said, rather weakly. Just have him meet me, Oscar said. I make all boyfriends feel better about themselves. I don't know, Yvón said. Maybe we shouldn't spend so much time together. Shouldn't you be looking for a girlfriend?

I got one, he said.

A jealous Third World cop ex-boyfriend? Maybe we shouldn't spend so much time together? Any other nigger would have pulled a Scooby-Doo double take—Eeuooooorr?—would have thought twice about staying in Santo Domingo another day, but not Oscar.

Two days later, Oscar found his tío examining the front door. What's the matter? His tío showed him the door and pointed at the concrete-block wall on the other side of the foyer. I think somebody shot our house last night. He shook his head. Fucking Dominicans. Probably hosed the whole neighborhood down.

For a second, Oscar felt this strange tugging in the back of his head, what someone else might have called Instinct, but instead of hunkering down and sifting through it he said, We probably didn't hear it because of all our air-conditioners. Then he walked over to Yvón's. They were going to the Duarte that day.



"One thing's for sure. We'll have to mend our evil ways when Hillary shows up."

• •

OSCAR GETS BEAT

In the middle of August, Oscar finally met the Capitán. Yvón had passed out again. It was super-late and he'd been following Clives in the Pathfinder, the usual routine, when a crowd of cops up ahead let Clives pass and then asked Oscar to please step out of the vehicle. These were the D.R.'s new highway police, brand-new uniforms and esprit de corps up to here. It's not my truck, he explained, it's hers. He pointed to sleeping Yvón. We understand. If you could please step out of the truck. It wasn't until these two plainclothes—who we'll call Solomon Grundy and Gorilla Grodd, for simplicity's sake—tossed him into the back of a black Volkswagen bug that he realized something was up. Wait a minute, he said as they pulled out, where the hell are you taking me? Wait! Gorilla Grodd gave him one cold glance and that was all it took to quiet his ass down. This is fucked up, he said under his breath. I didn't *do* nothing.

The Capitán was waiting for him on a noticeably unelectrified stretch of road. A skinny forty-something-year-old jabao standing near his spotless red Jeep, dressed nice in slacks and a crisply pressed white button-down, his shoes bright as scarabs. The Capitán was one of those tall, arrogant, handsome niggers that most of the planet feels inferior to. (The Capitán was also one of those very bad men who not even postmodernism can explain away.)

So you're the New Yorker, he said with great cheer. When Oscar saw the Capitán's close-set eyes he knew he was fucked. (He had the Eyes of Lee Van Cleef!) If it hadn't been for the courage of his sphincter, Oscar's lunch and his dinner and his breakfast would have whooshed straight out of him.

I didn't do anything, Oscar quailed. Then he blurted out, I'm an American citizen.

The Capitán waved away a mosquito. I'm an American citizen, too. I was sworn in in the city of Buffalo, in the State of New York.

I bought mine in Miami, Gorilla Grodd said.

Not me, Solomon Grundy lamented. I only got my damn residency.

Please, you have to believe me, I didn't do anything.

The Capitán smiled. Motherfucker even had First World teeth. Oscar was lucky; if he had looked like my pana Pedro, the Dominican Superman, he probably would have got shot right there. But because he was a young homely slob the Capitán punched him only a couple of times, warned him away from Yvón in no uncertain terms, and then remanded him to Messrs. Grundy and Grodd, who squeezed him back into the bug and drove out to the cane fields between Santo Domingo and Villa Mella.

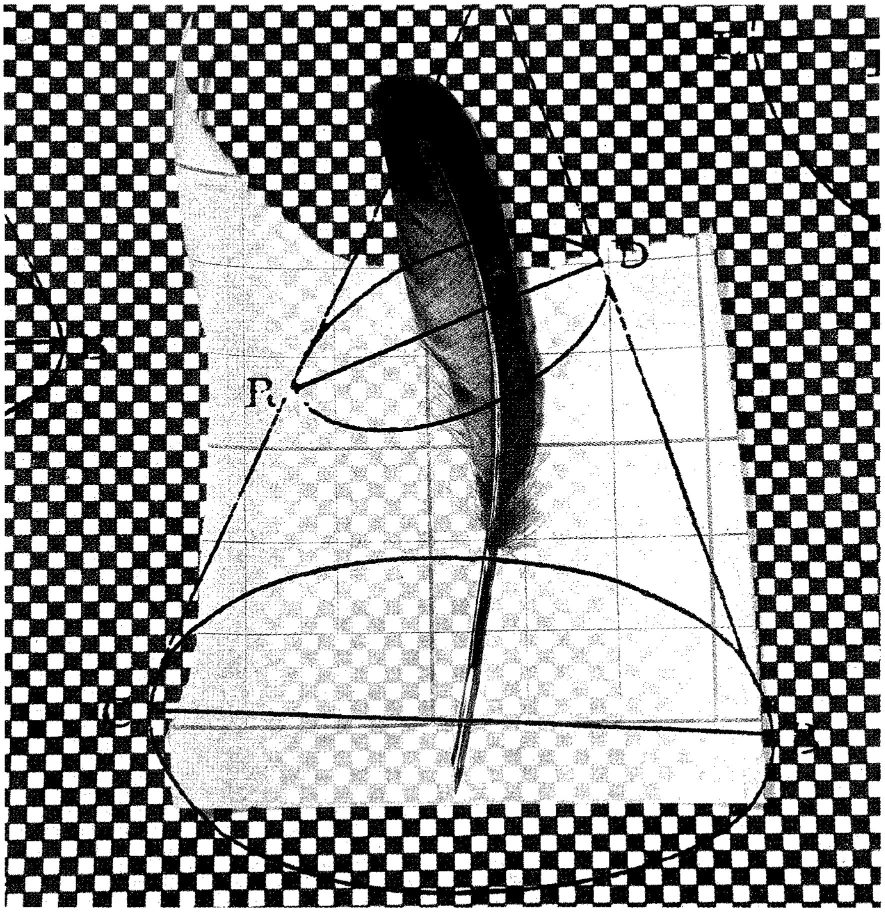
Oscar was too scared to speak. He was a shook daddy. He couldn't believe it. He was going to die. He tried to imagine Yvón at the funeral in her nearly see-through black sheath and couldn't. Watched Santo Domingo race past and felt impossibly alone. Thought about his mother and his sister and started crying.

You need to keep it down, Grundy said, but Oscar couldn't stop, even when he put his hands in his mouth.

At the cane fields, Messrs. Grodd and Grundy pulled Oscar out of the car, walked him into the cane, and then with their pistol butts proceeded to give him the beating to end all beatings. It was the Götterdämmerung of beatdowns, a beatdown so cruel and relentless that even Camden, the City of the Ultimate Beatdown, would have been impressed. (Yessir, nothing like getting smashed in the face with those patented Pachmayr Presentation Grips.) He shrieked, but that didn't stop the beating; he begged, but that didn't stop it, either; he blacked out, but that was no relief; the niggers kicked

INFLUENCES BY JULIAN BARNES

SINGLE-HANDED



IRAIDA ICAZA

Most British writers of my generation, when promoting their books in Spain, have been asked the following question: "Can you describe, please, the exact influence on you of the works of Tom Sharpe?" Mr. Sharpe, it may need explaining, is a writer of jocose farce (student, embarrassed by acquiring large quantities of condoms, inflates them with gas, stuffs them up his chimney, someone lights the fire, the chimney explodes—that sort of thing), who in certain Spanish eyes holds a central and dominating position in English literature. The trick is to keep a polite expression on your face while wondering whether translation has greatly improved Mr. Sharpe's work or sabotaged your own.

In France, literary godparentage is guessed at differently. If a British novelist departs from the conventional, then his or her influences are self-evident: Laurence Sterne, Lewis Carroll, "Monty Python." I usually nod assentingly to "Monty Python" while keeping quiet about never having read "Tristram Shandy." But of course I don't mean it about "Monty Python": much as the show saturated my consciousness a quarter of a century ago, I can't think of a single line I've written that is in any way indebted to it.

In Britain, the question of influence is posed in a slightly subtler way: Which authors did/do you admire when you were growing up/when you first thought of becoming a writer/now? Like most novelists, I have a variable catechism ready, according to the mood of the day. I might cite Waugh-Greene-Huxley, or Flaubert-Turgenev-Chekhov, or Wharton–Ford (F. M.)–Updike, or Lermontov-Lampedusa-Tournier, or some more left-field pairing, like Scott and Penelope Fitzgerald. When fed up with the game of ancestors, I tend to fall back on a grim-visaged "Shakespeare's very good," or point out that it is perfectly possible to be influenced by an unread book, by the account or notion of a book rather than by the consumed volume itself.

I'm not being difficult; or, rather, not difficult in the way it might seem. I genuinely have no idea of the "influences" on my work; I'd go further and say that I am uninfluenced by anybody. This may sound like a psychopathic level of denial, but it seems to me to be true. Take the case of Flaubert. I revere him, as many other novelists do; I reread him constantly; I cite to myself and to others his wisdom and practical advice; I agree with him that prose is like hair and shines with combing, that a line of prose can and should be as immutable as a line of poetry, and so on. But when, as a twenty-first-century English novelist, I feed a sheet of A4 into my I.B.M. 196C, I do not refer to a nineteenth-century French novelist who held a goose quill. I write in a different language; the novel, like the technology, has moved on. It would be pointless and stultifying to seek to write like him. After all, *he* wrote like him, so why should I?

I am aware, theoretically, that all artists produce their work within a social and artistic continuum; even those who try to stand outside it are acknowledging—and are therefore being influenced by—whatever it is they stand outside. I can identify quite clearly the influences that inhabit and overwhelm some of my contemporaries.

X is an echo chamber of the famous; Y is a glove puppet operated by grownup fingers. But in order to write what I do I have to convince myself, first, that I have never before written a novel like the one I am about to undertake; and, second, that no one else in the history of literature has ever done so, either. Otherwise there would be no point in starting. This is doubtless naïve, and probably vain, but it is a necessary and continuing self-deception. Consider the alternative: if you saw your books, as some critics later, uselessly, will, in recipe terms (two cups Flaubert, a grinding of Wharton, a tablespoon of Ford Madox Ford, one egg, and a pinch of "Monty Python" baking powder), you would never go near the stove in the first place.

Novelists have never much operated in schools; and they do so perhaps even less nowadays. What they often do instead is construct their own school from the exemplary and companionable novelists of the past. Such authors are both your masters and your fellow-students; sometimes they daunt, sometimes they encourage. But their true influence is to say, simply and repeatedly, across the years: Go thou and do otherwise.

him in the nuts and perked him right up! It was like one of those nightmare 8 A.M. M.L.A. panels that you think will never, ever end. Man, Gorilla Grodd said, this kid is making me *sweat*. Toward the end, Oscar found himself thinking about his old dead abuela, who used to scratch his back and fry him yaniqueques; she was sitting in her rocking chair and when she saw him she snarled, What did I tell you about those putas?

The only reason he didn't lie out in that rustling endless cane for the rest of his life was because Clives the evangelical taxista had had the guts to follow the cops on the sly, and when they broke out he turned on his headlights and pulled up to where they'd last been and found poor Oscar. Are you alive? Clives whispered. Oscar said, Blub, blub. Clives couldn't hoist Oscar into the car alone so he drove to a nearby batey and recruited a couple of Haitian braceros to help him. This is a big one, one of the braceros joked. The only thing Oscar said the whole ride back was her name. *Yvón*. Broken nose, broken zygomatic arch, crushed seventh cranial nerve, three of his front teeth snapped off at the gum, concussion, alive.

That was the end of it. When Moms de León heard it was the police, she called first a doctor and then the airlines. She wasn't no fool; she'd lived through Trujillo and the Devil Balaguer; knew that the cops hadn't forgotten shit from those days. She put it in the simplest of terms. You stupid, worthless, no-good son of a whore are going home. No, he said, through demolished lips. He wasn't fooling, either. When he first woke up and realized that he was still alive, he insisted on seeing Yvón. I love her, he whispered, and his mother said, Shut up, you! Just shut up!

The doctor ruled out epidural hematoma but couldn't guarantee that Oscar didn't have brain damage. (She was a cop's girlfriend? Tío Rodolfo whistled. I'll vouch for the brain damage.) Send him home right now, homegirl said, but for four whole days Oscar resisted any attempt to be packed up in a plane, which says a lot about this fat kid's fortitude; he was eating morphine by the handful and his grill was in agony, he had an around-the-clock quadruple migraine and couldn't see squat out of his right eye; motherfucker's head was so swollen he looked like John Merrick, Jr., and anytime he attempted to stand, the ground whisked right out from under him. My God! he thought. So this is what it feels like to get your ass *kicked*. It wasn't all bad, though; the beating granted him strange insights: he heard his tío, three rooms over, stealing money from his mother's purse; and he realized that had he and Yvón not been serious the Capitán would probably never have fucked with him. Proof positive that he and Yvón had a relationship.

Yvón didn't answer her cell, and the few times Oscar managed to limp to the window he saw that her Pathfinder wasn't there. I love you, he shouted into the street. I love you! Once, he made it to her door and buzzed before his tío realized that he was gone and dragged him back inside.

And, then, on Day Three, she came. While she sat on the edge of his bed, his mother banged pots in the kitchen and said "puta" loudly enough for them to hear.

Forgive me if I don't get up, Oscar whispered. I'm having a little trouble with my face.

She was dressed in white, like an angel, and her hair was still wet from the shower, a tumult of brownish curls. Of course the Capitán had beaten the shit out of her, too; of course she had two black eyes. (He'd also put his .44 Magnum in her vagina and asked her who she really loved.) There was nothing about her that Oscar wouldn't have gladly kissed. She put her fingers on his hand and told him that she could never be with him again. For some reason, Oscar couldn't see her face; it was a blur, she had retreated completely into that other plane of hers. Heard only the sorrow of her breathing. He tried to focus but all he saw was his love for her. Yvón? he croaked, but she was already gone.

Se acabó. Oscar refused to look at the ocean as they drove to the airport. It's beautiful today, Clives remarked. On the flight over, Oscar sat between his tío and his moms. Jesus, Oscar, Rodolfo said nervously. You look like they put a shirt on a turd.

P-TOWN BLUES

Oscar returned to Paterson. He lay in bed, he stared at his games, he read Andre Norton books, he healed. He talked to the school, and they told him not to worry about the job; it was his when he was ready. You're lucky you're alive, his mother told him. Maybe you could save up your money and get an operation for your face, his tío suggested. Oscar, his sister sighed, Oscar. On the darkest days, he sat in his tío's closet, the Dragoon on his lap, looked back over the past two decades of his life, saw nothing but cowardice and fear. So why was there still a fortress in his heart? Why did he feel like he could be Minas Tirith if he wanted to? He really tried to forget, but he couldn't. He dreamed that he was adrift, alone in his spacesuit, and that she was calling to him.

Me and Lola were living up in the Heights—this was before the white kids started their invasion, when you could walk the entire length of Harlem and see not a single "homesteader." September, October? I was home for the week, curling ninety, when Oscar buzzed me from the street. Hadn't seen him in weeks. Jesus, Oscar, I said. Come up, come up. I waited for him in the hall and when he stepped out of the elevator I put the mitts on him. How are you, bro?

I'm fine, he said, smiling sheepishly.

We sat down and I broke up a dutch, asked him how it was going.

I'm going back to Don Bosco soon.

Word? I said.

Word, he said. His face was still fucked up, the left side was paralyzed and wouldn't get better anytime soon, but he wasn't hiding it anymore. I still got the Two-Face going on bad, he said, laughing.

You gonna smoke?

Just a little. I don't want to cloud my faculties.

That last day on our couch, he looked like a man at peace with himself. You should have seen him. He was so thin, had lost all the weight, and was still, still.

I want to know, Yunior, if you can do me a favor.

Anything, bro. Just ask it.

He needed money for a security deposit, was finally moving into his own apartment, and of course I gave it to him. All I had, but if anybody was going to pay me back it was Oscar.

We smoked the dutch and talked about the problems me and Lola were having.

You should never have had carnal relations with that Paraguayan girl, he pointed out.

I know, I said, I know. He seemed confident that it would work itself out, though, and there was something in his tone that made me hopeful. You ain't going to wait for Lola?

Have to get back to Paterson. I got a date.

You're shitting me?

He shook his head, the tricky fuck.

On Saturday, he was gone.

THE LAST DAYS

As soon as he hit the airport exit, Oscar called Clives and homeboy picked him up an hour later. Cristiano, Clives said, eyes tearing, what are you doing here?

It's the Ancient Powers, Oscar said. They won't leave me alone.

They parked in front of her house and waited almost seven hours before she returned. Pulled up in the Pathfinder. She looked thinner. For a moment, he thought about letting the whole thing go, returning to Bosco and getting on with his life, but then she stooped over to pick up her gym bag, as if the whole world were watching, and that settled it. He winched down the window and called her name. She stopped, shaded her eyes, and then recognized him. She said his name, terrified. *Oscar.* He popped the door and walked over to where she was standing and embraced her and she said, Mi amor, you have to leave right now.

In the middle of the street, he told her how it was. He was in love with her. He'd been hurt, but now he was all right, and if he could just have a week alone with her, one short week, then everything would be fine, and he would be able to go on with his life, and he said it again, that he loved her more than the universe, and it wasn't something that he could shake, so, please, come away with him for a little while, and then it would be over if she wanted.

Maybe she did love him a little bit. Maybe in her heart of hearts she left the gym bag on the concrete and got in the taxi with him. But she'd known men like the Capitán all her life. Knew, also, that in the D.R. they called a bullet a cop's divorce. The gym bag was not left on the street.

I'm going to call him, Oscar, she said, misting up a little. So, please, go, before he gets here.

I'm not going anywhere, he said.

For twenty-seven days he chased her. He sat in front of her house, he called her on her cell, he went to the World Famous Riverside, a casa de putas where she worked. The neighbors, when they saw him on the curb, shook their heads and said, Look at that loco.

She was miserable when she saw him and miserable, she would tell him later, when she didn't, convinced that he'd been killed. He slipped long passionate letters under her gate, written in English, and the only response he got was when the Capitán and his friends called and threatened to chop him in pieces. After each threat, he recorded the time and then phoned the Embassy and told them that the Capitán had threatened to kill him, and asked, Could you please help?

She started scribbling back notes and passed them to him at the club or had them mailed to his house. Please, Oscar, I haven't slept in a week. I don't want you to end up hurt or dead. Go home.

But, beautiful girl above all beautiful girls, he wrote back. This *is* my home.

Your real home, mi amor.

A person can't have two?

Night Nineteen, she honked her horn, and he opened his eyes and knew it was her. She leaned over and unlocked the truck door, and when he got in he tried to kiss her, but she said, Please stop it. They drove out toward La Romana, where the Capitán didn't have no friends. Nothing new was discussed, but he said, I like your new haircut, and she started laughing and crying and said, Really? You don't think it makes me look cheap?

You and cheap do not compute, Yvón.

What could we do? Lola flew down to see him, begged him to come home, told him that he was only going to get Yvón and himself killed; he listened and then said angrily that she didn't understand how he felt, never had. How incredibly short are twenty-seven days.

One night, the Capitán and his friends came into the Riverside, and Oscar stared at the man for a good ten seconds and then, whole body shaking, he left. Didn't bother to call Clives, jumped in the first taxi he could find. The next night Oscar was back and, in the parking lot of the Riverside, he tried again to kiss Yvón; she turned her head away (but not her body). Please don't, she said. He'll kill us.

Twenty-seven days, and then the expected happened. One night, he and Clives were driving back from the World Famous Riverside and at a light two men got into the cab with them. It was, of course, Gorilla Grodd and Solomon Grundy. Good to see you again, Grodd said, and then they beat him as best they could, given the limited space inside the cab.

This time, Oscar didn't cry when they drove him back to the cane fields. Zafra would be here soon, and the cane had grown well and thick and in places you could hear the stalks clack-clack-clacking against each other like triffids, and you could hear the kriyol voices lost in the night. There was a moon, and Clives begged the men to spare Oscar, but they laughed. You should be worrying, Grodd said, about yourself. Oscar sent telepathic messages to his moms (I love you, Señora), to Rodolfo (Quit, Tío, and live), to Lola (I'm so sorry it happened; I always loved you), and the longest to Yvón.

They walked him into the cane and then turned him around. (Clives they left tied up in the cab.) They looked at him and he looked at them, and then he started to speak. He told them that what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world. Love was a rare thing, he told them, easily confused with a million other things, and if anybody knew this to be true it was him. He told them about Yvón and the way he loved her and how much they had risked and that they'd started to dream the same dreams and say the same words, and he told them that if they killed him they would probably feel nothing and their children would probably feel nothing, either, not until they were old and weak or about to be struck by a car, and then they would sense his waiting for them on the other side, and over there he wouldn't be no fat boy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved, over there he'd be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you can dream (he put his hand up) you can be.

They waited for him to finish, and then they shot him to pieces.

Oscar—

THE END OF THE STORY

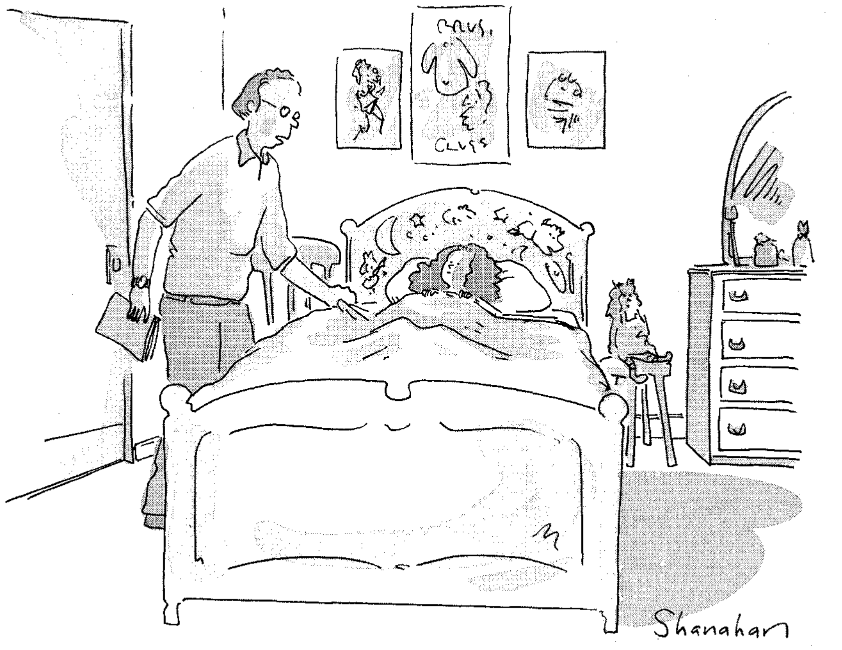
Lola and I flew down to claim the body. We went to the funeral. A year later, we broke up.

Four times, the family hired lawyers, but no charges were ever filed. The Embassy didn't help and neither did the government. Yvón, I hear, is still living in Mirador Norte, still dancing at the Riverside. The de Leóns sold their house a year later.

Lola swore she would never return to that terrible country, and I don't think she ever has. On one of our last nights, she said, Eight million Trujillos is all we are.

(Of course things like this don't happen in Santo Domingo no more. We have enlightened, uncorrupt politicians and a kind benevolent President and a people who are clearheaded and loving. The country is kind, no Haitian or dark-skinned person is hated, the élites fuck nobody, and the police measure their probity by the mile.)

Almost eight weeks after Oscar died, a package arrived at the house in Paterson. Two manuscripts enclosed. One was chapters of his never-to-be-completed opus, an E. E. (Doc) Smithesque space opera called "Starscourge." The other was a long letter to Lola. Turns out that toward the end the palomo *did* get Yvón away from the capital. For two whole days, they hid out on some beach in Barahona while the Capitán was away on "business," and guess what? Yvón actually kissed him! Guess what else? Yvón actually fucked him. Yahoo! He reported that he'd liked it and that Yvón's you-know-what hadn't tasted the way he had expected. She tastes like Heineken, he said. He wrote that at night Yvón had nightmares that the Capitán had found them; once, she'd woken up and said in the voice of true fear, Oscar, he's here, really believing he was, and Oscar woke up and threw himself at the Capitán but it turned out to be only a turtle shell the hotel had hung on the wall for decoration. Almost busted my nose! He wrote that Yvón had little hairs coming up almost to her bellybutton and that she crossed her eyes when she fucked but what really got him were the little intimacies that he'd never in his whole life anticipated, like combing her hair or getting her underwear off a line or watching her walk naked to the bathroom or the way she would suddenly sit on his lap and put her face into his neck. The intimacies like listening to her tell him about being a little girl and him telling her that he'd been a virgin all his life. He wrote that he couldn't believe he'd had to wait for this so goddam long. (Yvón was the one who suggested calling the wait something else. Yeah, like what? Maybe, she said, you could call it life.) He wrote: So this is what everybody's always talking about! Diablo! If only I'd known. The beauty! The beauty! ♦



"Now close your eyes and go to sleep or Daddy will read you more of his novel."

FICTION

CALLING

BY RICHARD FORD

A year after my father departed, moved to St. Louis, and left my mother and me behind in New Orleans, to look after ourselves in whatever manner we could, he called on the telephone one afternoon and asked to speak to me. This was before Christmas, 1961. I was home from military school in Florida. My mother had begun her new singing career, which meant taking voice lessons at a local academy, and also letting a tall black man who was her accompanist move into our house and into her bedroom, while passing himself off to the neighborhood as the yardman. William Dubinion was his name, and together he and my mother drank far too much and filled up the ashtrays and played jazz recordings too loud and made unwelcome noises until late, which had not been how things were done when my father was there. However, it was done because he was not there, and because he had gone off to St. Louis with another man, an ophthalmologist named Francis Carter, never to come back. I think it seemed to my mother that in view of these facts it didn't matter what she did or how she lived, and that doing the worst was finally not much different from doing the best.

They are all dead now. My father. My mother. Dr. Carter. The black accompanist, Dubinion. Though occasionally I will still see a man on St. Charles Avenue, in the business district, a man entering one of the new office buildings they've built—a tall, handsome, long-strided, flaxen-haired, youthful, slightly ironic-looking man in a seersucker suit, bow tie, and white shoes, who will remind me of my father, or how he looked, at least, when these events occurred. He must've looked that way all of his years, into his sixties. New Orleans produces men like my father, or once did: clubmen, racquets players, deft, balmy-day sailors, soft-handed Episcopalians with progressive attitudes, good educations, effortless manners, but with secrets. These men, when you meet them on the sidewalk, or at some uptown dinner party, seem like the very best damn old guys you could ever know. You want to call them up the next day and set some plans going. It seems that you always knew about them, that they were present in the city, but you just hadn't seen a lot of them—a glimpse here and there. They seem exotic, and your heart expands with the thought of a long friendship's commencement and your mundane life taking a new and better turn. So you do call, and you do see them. You go spec fishing off Pointe a la Hache. You stage a dinner and meet their pretty wives. You take a long lunch together at Antoine's or Commander's, and decide to do this every week from now on to never. And yet someplace along late in the lunch you hit a flat spot. A silent moment occurs, and your eyes meet in a way that could signal a deep human understanding you'd never ever have to speak about. But what you see is, suddenly—and it is sudden and fleeting—you see this man is far, far away from you, so far, in fact, as not even to realize it. A smile could be playing on his face. He may just have said something charming or incisive or flatteringly personal to you. But then the far, faraway awareness dawns, and you know you're nothing to him and will probably never even see him again, never take the trouble. Or, if you do chance to see him, you'll cross streets mid-block, cast around for exits in crowded dining rooms, sit longer than you need to in the front seat of your car to let such a man go around a corner or disappear into the very building I mentioned. You avoid him. And it is not that there is anything so wrong with him, nothing unsavory or misaligned. Nothing sexual. You just know he is not for you. And that is an end to it. It's simple, really. Though of course it's more complicated when this involves your father.

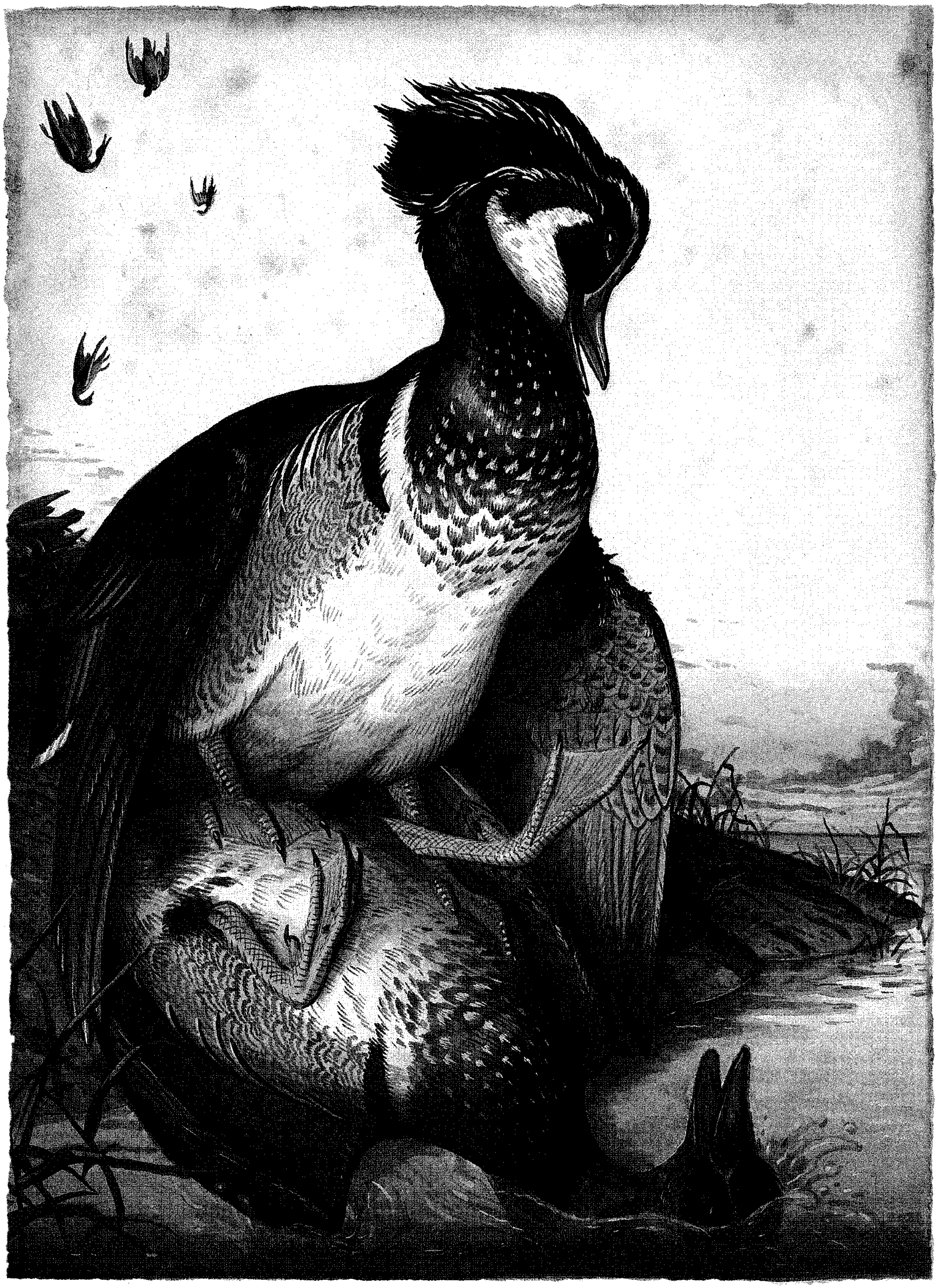
When I came to the telephone for my father's call—my mother had answered and they had spoken some terse words—my father began right away to talk: "Well, let's see, is it Van Cliburn, or Mickey Mantle?" These were two heroes of the time whom I had gone on about and alternately wanted to be when he was still in our lives. I had already forgotten them.

"Neither one," I said. I was in the big front hall where the telephone alcove was. I could see outside through the glass front door. William Dubinion was there on our gated lawn, on his knees in the monkey grass that bordered my mother's camellias. It was a fine situation, I thought—staring at my mother's colored boyfriend while talking to my father in his far-off new city, living as he did. "Oh of course," my father said. "Those were our last year's fascinations."

"It was longer ago," I said. My mother made a noise in the next room. I breathed her cigarette smoke, heard the newspaper crackle. She was listening to everything, and I didn't want to seem friendly to my father, which I did not feel in any case. I thought he was a bastard.

"Well now, see here, ole Buck Rogers," my father continued. "I'm calling up about an important matter to the future of mankind. I'd like to know if you'd care to go duck hunting in the fabled Grand Lake marsh. With me. I have to come to town in two days to settle some business. My ancient father had a trusted family retainer named Renard Theriot, a disreputable old yat. But Renard could unquestionably blow a duck call. So I've arranged for his son, Mr. Renard, Jr., to put us both in a blind and

COURTESY OF PAUL KASMIN GALLERY AND ARTIST



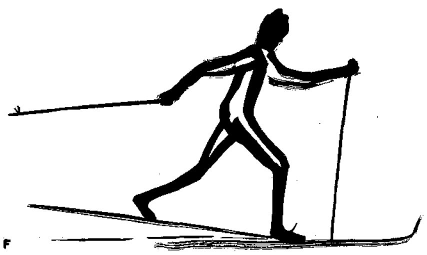
PAINTING BY WALTON FORD

call in several thousand ducks for our pleasure." My father cleared his throat in the stagy way he always did when he talked like this—highfalutin. "I mean if you're not overbooked, of course," he said and cleared his throat again.

"I might be," I said, and suddenly felt strange even to be talking to him. He occasionally called me at military school, where I had to converse with him in the orderly room. He naturally paid all my school bills, sent an allowance, and saw to my mother's expenses. He probably paid for William Dubinion's services, too, and wouldn't have cared what their true nature was. He had also conceded us the big white Greek Revival raised cottage on McKendall Street in uptown. (McKendall is our family name—my name. It is such a family as that.) But, still, it was very odd to think that your father was living with another man, and was calling up to ask you to go duck hunting. And then to have my mother listening, sitting and smoking and reading the *States Item*, in the very next room and thinking whatever she must've been thinking. It was nearly too much for me.

And yet I wanted to go duck hunting, to go by boat out into the marshes that make up the vast, brackish tidal land south and east of our city. I had always imagined I'd go with my father when I was old enough. And I was old enough now, and had already been taught to fire a rifle—though not a shotgun—in my school. Also, when I spoke to him that day, he did not sound to me like some man who was living with another man in St. Louis. He sounded the way he always had in our normal life, when I had gone to Jesuit, and he had practiced law in the Hibernia Bank building, and we were a family. Something I think about my father, whose name was Boatwright McKendall, and who was only forty-one years old at the time: something about him must've wanted things to be as they had been before he met his great love, Dr. Carter. Though you could also say that my father just wanted not to have it be that he couldn't do whatever he wanted. He wouldn't credit that anything he did might be deemed wrong, or the cause of hard feeling or divorce or terrible scandal such as what sees you expelled from the law firm your family started a hundred years ago and that bears your name; or that you conceivably caused the early death of your own mother from sheer disappointment. And in fact if anything he did had caused someone difficulty, or ruined a life or prospects, or set someone on a downward course—well, then he just largely ignored it, or agreed to pay money for it, and afterward tried his level best to go on as if the world were a smashingly great place for everyone and we could all be wonderful friends. It was the absence I mentioned before, the skill he had not to be where he exactly was, and yet to *seem* present to any but the most practiced observer. A son, for instance.

"Well, now look-it here, Mr. Buck Rogers," my father said to me over the telephone from—I guessed—St. Louis. Buck is what I was called and still am, to distinguish me from him (our name is the same). And I remember becoming suddenly nervous, as if by agreeing to go with him, and to see him for the first time since he had left a New Year's party at the Boston Club and gone away with Dr. Carter—by doing these altogether natural things (going hunting) I was crossing a line, putting myself at risk. And not the risk you might think based on low instinct, but some kind you don't know exists until you feel it in your belly, the way you would if you were running down a steep hill and at the bottom there's a deep river or a canyon, and you can't stop. Disappointment was what I risked, I know now. But I wanted what I wanted and would not let such a feeling stop me. "I want you to know," my father continued, "that I've cleared all this with your mother. She thinks it's a wonderful idea." I pictured his yellow hair, his handsome, youthful, unlined face talking animatedly into the receiver in some elegant, sunny, high-ceilinged room, beside an expensive French table, with some fancy art object beside him, which he would be picking up and inspecting as he talked. In my picture he was wearing a purple smoking jacket and he seemed happy to be doing what he was doing.



"Is somebody else going?" I said.

"Oh, God no," my father said, and laughed. "Like who? Francis is too refined to go duck hunting. He'd be afraid of getting his beautiful blue eyes put out. Wouldn't you, Francis?" It shocked me to think Dr. Carter was right there in the room with him, listening. My mother, of course, was also listening to me. "It'll just be you and me and Renard, Jr.," my father said, his voice going away from the receiver. I heard a second voice, a soft one, say something then where my father was, possibly some ironic comment about our plans. "Oh Christ," my father said in an irritated tone, a tone of his I didn't know any better than I knew Dr. Carter's. "Just don't say that. This is not that kind of conversation. This is Buck here." The voice said something else, and in my mind I suddenly saw Dr. Carter in a very unkind way, a way I will not even describe. "Now you raise your bones at 4 A.M. on Thursday, Commander Rogers," my father said in his highfalutin style. "Ducks are early risers. I'll collect you in front of your house. Wear your boots and your Dr. Dentons and nothing bright-colored. I'll supply the artillery for us."

It seemed odd that my father thought of the great house where we had all lived, and that his own father and grandfather had lived in since after the Civil War, as *my* house. It was not my house, I felt. The most it was was my mother's house, because she had married him in it and then taken it in their hasty divorce.

"How's school, by the way," my father said distractedly.

"How's what?" I was so surprised to be asked that. My father sounded confused, as if he'd been reading something and lost his place on a page.

"School. You know? Grades? Did you get all A's? You should. You're smart. At least, you have a smart mouth."

"I hate school," I said. I had liked Jesuit, where I'd had friends. But my mother had made me go away to Sandhearst because of all the upset with my father's leaving. There I wore a khaki uniform with a blue stripe down the side of my pants leg, and a stiff blue doorman's hat. I felt a fool at all times.

"Oh, well, who cares," my father said. "You'll get into Harvard the same way I did."

"What way," I asked, because even at fifteen I wanted to go to Harvard.

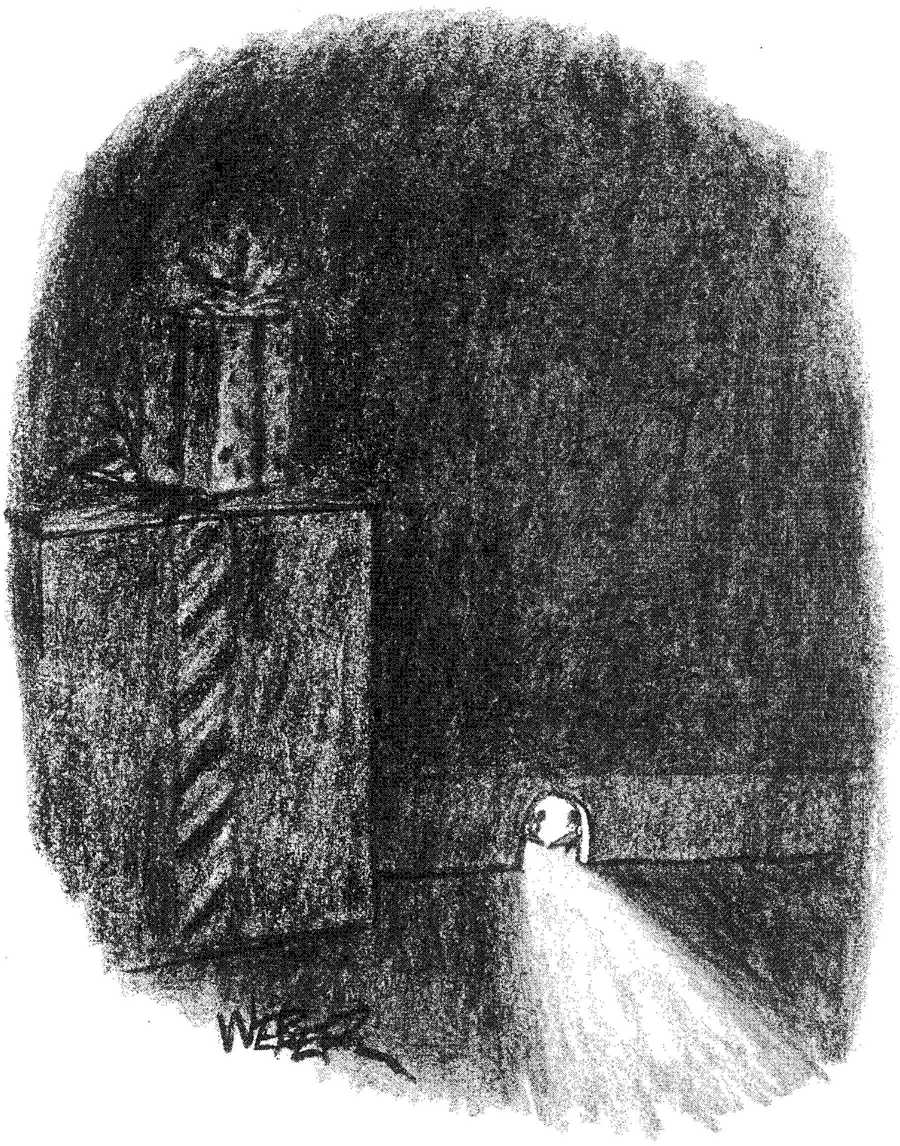
"On looks," my father said. "That's how Southerners get along. That's the great intelligence. Once you know that, the rest is pretty simple. The world wants to operate on looks. It only uses brains if looks aren't available. Ask your mother. It's why she married me when she shouldn't have. She'll admit it now."

"I think she's sorry about it now." I thought about my mother listening to half our conversation.

"Oh, yes. I'm sure she is, Buck. We're all a little sorry now. I'll testify to that."

The other voice in the room where he was spoke something then, again in an ironic tone. "Oh shut up," my father said. "Just shut up that talk and stay out of this. I'll see you Thursday morning, son," my father said, and he hung up before I could answer.

This conversation with my father occurred on Monday, the eighteenth of December, three days before we were supposed to go duck hunting in the marsh. And, for the days in between then and Thursday, my mother more or less avoided me, staying in her room upstairs with the door closed, and often with William Dubinion, or going away in the car to her singing lessons with William acting as her chauffeur—though she rode in the front seat. It was still the turbulent race times then, and colored people were being lynched and trampled upon and burnt out all over the Southern states. And yet it was just as likely to cause no uproar if a proper white woman appeared in public with a Negro man in our city. There was no rule or logic to any of it. It was New Orleans, and if you could carry it off you did. Plus Mr. Dubinion didn't mind working in the camellia beds in front of our house, just for the record. In truth, I do not think he minded about very much. He had grown up in the cotton patch in Pointe Coupee Parish, between the rivers, had somehow made it to music school at Wilberforce, in Ohio, been to Korea, and played in the Army band. Later, he barged around playing the clubs and juke joints in the city for a decade before he somehow met my mother at a society party where he was the paid entertainment and she was putting herself into the public eye to make the case that, when your husband abandons you for a rich queer, life will go on.



"Night before Christmas or no night before Christmas, I feel like stirring."

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Mr. Dubinion never addressed much to me. He had arrived in my mother's life after I had gone away to military school, and was simply a fait accompli when I came home for Thanksgiving. He was a tall, skinny, solemnly long-yellow-faced Negro with sallow, moist eyes, a soft lisp, and enormous bony, pink-nailed hands he could stretch up and down a piano keyboard. I don't think my mother could have thought he was handsome, but possibly that didn't matter. He often parked himself in our long living room, drinking Scotch whiskey, smoking cigarettes, and playing tunes he made up right on my grandfather's Steinway concert grand. He would hum under his breath and grunt and sway up and back like the jazzman Erroll Garner. He usually looked at me only out of the corner of his yellow Oriental-looking eye, as if neither of us really belonged in such a dignified place as my family's house. He knew, I suppose, he would not be there forever and was happy for a reprieve from his usual life, and to have my mother as his temporary girlfriend. He seemed to believe I would not be there

"At what do you toil?"

much longer, and that we had that in common.

The one thing I remember him saying to me was during the two days before I went with my father to the marsh that Christmas—Dubinion's only Christmas with us, as it turned out. I came into the great shadowy living room where the piano sat beside the front window and where my mother had established a large Christmas tree with blinking red lights and a gold star on top. I had a copy of "The Inferno," which I had decided I would read over the holidays because the next year I hoped to leave Sandhearst and be admitted to Lawrenceville, where my father had gone before Harvard. William Dubinion was again in his place at the piano, smoking and drinking. My mother had been singing "You've Changed" in her pretty, thin soprano, and had left to take a rest because singing made her fatigued. When he saw the red jacket on my book he frowned at me and turned sideways on the bench and crossed a long thin leg over his other one so his pale hairless skin showed above his black patent-leather shoes. He was wearing black trousers with a white shirt, but no socks, which was his normal way to be around the house.

"That's a pretty good book, isn't it," he said, in his lisping voice, and stared at me in a way that felt accusatory.

"It's written in Italian," I said. "It's a poem about going to hell."

"So is that where you expect to go?"

"No," I said. "I don't."

" '*Per me si va nella città dolente. Per me si va nell' eterno dolore.*' That's all I remember," he said, and played a chord in the bass clef, a spooky, rumbling chord like the scary part in a movie.

I assumed he was making these words up, though of course he wasn't. "What's that supposed to mean," I said.

"Same ole," he said, his cigarette dangling in his mouth. "Watch your step when you take a guided tour of hell. Nothing new."

"When did you read this book?" I said insolently, stopped between the two partly closed pocket doors. This man was my mother's boyfriend, her Svengali, her impresario, her seducer and corrupter (as it turned out). And he was a strange, powerful man who had seen life I would never see. I'm sure I was both afraid of him and afraid he would detect it, which probably made me seem superior and therefore made him dislike me.

Dubinion looked up over the keyboard at an arrangement of red pyracanthas my mother had placed there. "Well, I could say something nasty. But I won't." He took a breath and let it out heavily. "You just go ahead on with your readin'. I'll go on with my playin'." He nodded but did not look at me again. We did not have too many more conversations after that. My mother sent him away later in the winter. Once or twice he returned but then finally disappeared. Though by then her life had changed in the bad way it was probably bound to change.

The only time I remember my mother speaking directly to me during these two days, other than to inform me that dinner was ready or that she was leaving at night to go out to some booking Dubinion had arranged, which I'm sure she paid him to arrange (and paid for the chance to sing as well), was on Wednesday afternoon, when I was sitting on the back porch, poring over the entrance-requirement information I'd had sent from Lawrenceville. I had never seen Lawrenceville, or been to New Jersey, never been farther away from New Orleans than Yankeetown, Florida, where my military school was, occupying the buildings of a former Catholic hospital for sick and crazy priests. But I thought that Lawrenceville—just the word itself—could save me from the impossible situation I deemed myself to be in. To go to Lawrenceville, to travel the many train miles to New Jersey and to enter whatever complex place New Jersey was—all that coupled with the fact that my father had gone there and my name and background meant something—seemed to offer me an escape and a relief and a future better than the one I had at home in New Orleans.

My mother had come out onto the back porch, which was glassed in and gave a prospect down onto the back-yard grass. On the manicured lawn was an arrangement of four Adirondack chairs and a wooden picnic table, all painted pink. The back yard was completely walled in, and no one but our next-door neighbors could see—if they chose—that William Dubinion was lying on top of the pink picnic table with his shirt off, smoking a cigarette and staring sternly up at the warm blue sky.

My mother stood for a while watching him. She was wearing a pair of men's white silk pajamas, and her voice was husky. I'm sure she was already taking the drugs that would soon disrupt her reasoning. She was holding a glass of milk, which was probably not just milk but milk with gin or Scotch or something in it to ease whatever she felt terrible about.

"What a splendid idea to go hunting with your father," my mother said sarcastically, as if we were continuing a conversation we'd been having earlier, though we had said nothing about it, despite my wanting to talk about it, and despite thinking I ought not go and hoping she wouldn't permit it. "Do you even own a gun?" she said, though she knew I didn't. She knew what I did and didn't own. I was fifteen.

"He's going to give me one."

She glanced at me where I was sitting, but her look didn't change. "I just wonder what it's like to take up with another man of your own social standing," my mother said, and ran her hand through her hair, which was newly colored ash blond and done in a very neat bob that had been Dubinion's idea. My mother's father had been a pharmacist on Prytania Street and had done well catering to the needs of rich families like the McKendalls. She had gone to Newcomb, married up, and come to be at ease with the society my father introduced her into. (Though I have never thought she really cared about New Orleans' society one way or the other—unlike my father, who cared about it enough to spit in its face.) "I always assume," she said, "that these escapades usually involve someone on a lower rung. A stevedore, or a towel attendant at your club." She was watching Dubinion. He must've qualified in her mind as a lower-rung personage. She and my father had been married for twenty years, and at age thirty-nine she had taken Dubinion into her life to wipe out any trace of a previous way of conducting her affairs. I realize now, as I tell this, that she and Dubinion had just been in bed together, and he was enjoying the dreamy aftermath by lying half-naked outside on our picnic table, while she roamed the house in her pajamas alone, and had to end up talking to me. It's sad to think that in a little more than a year, when I was just getting properly adjusted at Lawrenceville, she would be gone. Thinking of her now is like hearing the dead speak. "But I don't hold it against your father. The man part, anyway," my mother said. "Other things, of course, I do." She turned then, stepped over and took a seat on the striped-cushion wicker chair beside mine. She set her milk down and took my hand in her cool hands, and held it in her lap against her leg. "What if I became a very good singer and had to go on the road and play in Chicago and New York and possibly Paris? Would that be all right? You could come and see me perform. You could wear your school uniform." She pursed her lips and looked back at the yard, where William Dubinion was laid out on the picnic table like a pharaoh.

"I wouldn't enjoy that," I said. I didn't lie to her. She was going out at night and humiliating herself and making me embarrassed and afraid. I was not going to say I thought this was all fine. It was a disaster and soon would be proved so.

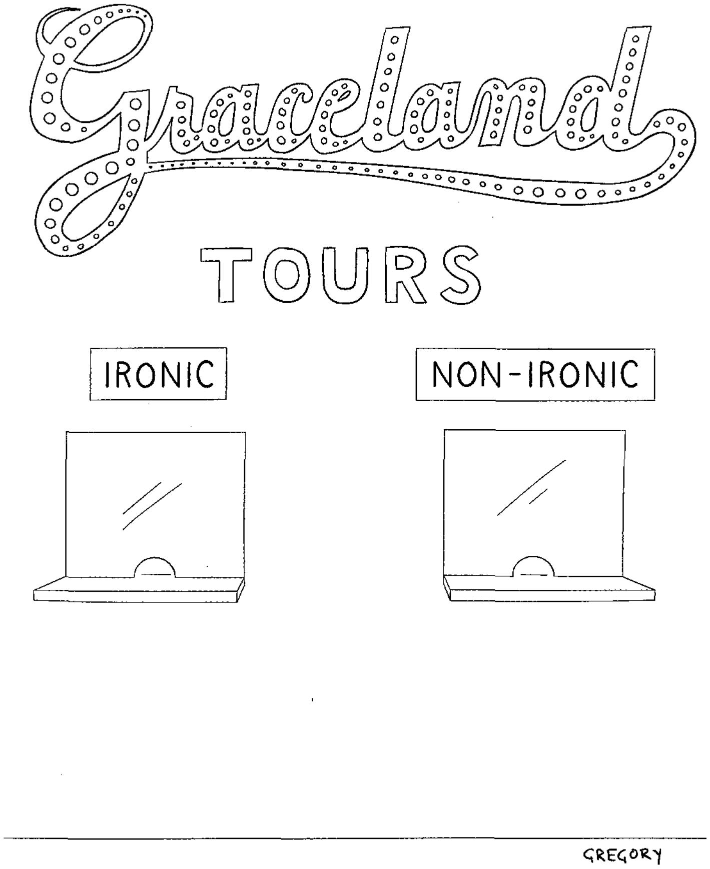
"No?" she said. "You wouldn't come see me perform in the Quartier Latin?"

"No," I said. "I never would."

"Well," she said and let go of my hand, crossed her legs, and propped her chin on her fist. "I'll have to live with that. Maybe you're right." She looked around at her glass of milk as if she'd forgotten where she'd left it.

"What other things do you hold against him?" I asked, referring to my father. The man part seemed enough to me.

"Oh," my mother said. "Are we back to him? Well, let's just say I hold his entire self against him. And not for my sake, certainly, but for yours. He could've kept things together here. Other men do. It's perfectly all right to have a lover of whatever category. So he's no worse than a lot of other men. But that's what I hold against him. I hadn't really thought about it before. He fails to be any better than most men would be. That's a capital offense in marriage. You'll have to grow up some more before you understand that. But you will." She picked up her glass of milk, rose, pulled her loose white pajamas up around her scant waist, and walked back inside the house. In a mo-



INFLUENCES BY GEORGE SAUNDERS

JOHNNY TREMAIN

It began, like so many things in those days, with a nun. Unlike the other nuns at St. Damian School, who, it seemed, had been born nuns, Sister Lynette seemed to have been born an adorable, sun-dappled Kansas girl with a Hayley Mills smile, who was then kidnapped by a band of older, plumper, meaner nuns, who were trying to break her. I was a little in love with Sister Lynette, with her dry wit and good-heartedness and also with the wisp of blond hair that snuck out from under her wimple. I thought of a convent as a place of terrific rigor, where prospective nuns were given access to esoteric knowledge, which they were then to secretly disseminate among select students in Middle America. Hoping to be so identified, I would linger in Sister Lynette's classroom after school (both of us covered in chalk dust, my wool pants smelling like Distressed Sheep) as she told me stories about her Kansas girlhood. I entertained rescue fantasies, in which Sister realized that the best way for her to serve God was to quit the nuns, marry me, and start wearing jeans as we travelled around the country making antiwar speeches. Since I was only in third grade, these fantasies required a pre-fantasy, in which pacifist aliens placed me in a sort of Aging Apparatus.

One afternoon, Sister Lynette handed me a book: "Johnny Tremain," by Esther Forbes. This is the story of an arrogant apprentice silversmith in Boston during the Revolutionary War, whose prospects are cut short by a tragic accident until he finds a new sense of purpose, in the war. The cover was a picture of young Johnny, looking a bit like Twiggy. On it there was a shiny gold medallion: the Newbery Medal.

It was an award-winner.

Sister Lynette had given me an award-winner.

I was soon carrying it around twenty-four hours a day, the Newbery Medal facing out, as if I, and not Esther Forbes, had written "Johnny Tremain."

"I think you can handle this," Sister said as she handed me the book (she had checked it out of the library for me), but what I heard was: "Only you, George, in this entire moronic class, can handle this. There is a spark in you, and it is that spark that keeps me from fleeing back to Kansas."

I imagined the scene at the convent: everyone in her nun gear, sitting around a TV that was somehow always tuned to "The Flying Nun." And then Sister Lynette makes her announcement:

"I'm thinking of giving Saunders 'Johnny Tremain.'"

A tense silence. "Isn't that . . ." asks Sister Humiline, the principal, "an award-winner?"

"It is," says Sister Lynette. "But I think he's ready."

"Well, then," says Sister Humiline. Clearly this is important. Denied this, Sister Lynette might make her break for Kansas. "Let him give it a try, then," says Sister Humiline. "But, truly, I wonder if he's got it in him. That book is hard, and he is only a third grader."

"Even I had trouble with it," pipes up a junior nun.

"I think he can handle it," says Sister Lynette.

And the wonderful thing was: I could handle it. I loved the language, which was dense and seemed not to care that

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it sounded mathematically efficient ("On rocky islands gulls woke"). The sentences somehow had got more life in them than normal sentences had. They were not merely sentences but compressed moments that burst when you read them. I often left the book open on the kitchen table, so that my mother and her friends could see that I was at home with phrases like "too cripple-handed for chopping open sea chests" or "Isannah drank herself sick and silly on sillabubs."

The tragic accident that happens early in the book ends Johnny's silversmithing: his right thumb is melded to the palm of his hand by molten silver. I loved this. During recess, I started holding my hand like his in the pocket of my coat, trying to get through the entire period without uncrippling myself. There was a sweetness in the bitterness I felt as I imagined that I was Johnny and that the whole world had turned against me, even my fiancée, Cilla, and her real-life corollary, Susan Pusateri. Had Susan smiled? She would marry me in spite of my deformity. Was she talking energetically to Joey Cannarozzi? She preferred his fully opposable thumb, and I would therefore have to lay siege to the British armory.

After a while, because I liked the idea of being wounded, but didn't much like the idea of actually having that pink flipperlike thing flapping around on my arm, a world-famous surgeon from France would arrive in the Boston in my head and fix my hand, and I would go back in to class, face chapped from the wind, holding the book in the now perfect hand, Newbery Medal facing outward.

"Good book?" Sister Lynette would say from her desk.

"Good book," I would say.

Finally, I finished it, and asked Sister Lynette to check it out for me again. But now the truth can be told: each time I read it, I skimmed or skipped the last third. I had no interest in the Boston Tea Party or Johnny's eventual redemption via war. What I liked was the crippling. Not the accident itself, but the pathos that followed. Johnny's sad lingering in doorways as his former life proceeded apace. His realization that those who loved him loved him only because he'd been doing well. In my mind, Johnny Tremain—in his debasement and sudden loneliness—had something in common with Charlie Brown, and later, in some deep way, with Christ himself. It was the story of the cast-down being cast down further, and I couldn't get enough of it.

Influence is an odd duck: Is it the case that, loving a book that happens to be about a jungle, we come thereafter to love the jungle? Or is it that, if we are predisposed to love the jungle, the book about the jungle is the one that gets under our skin? Did that nine-year-old kid with the sheep-smelling pants wind up trying to write stories about pathos and deformity (my preoccupation) because of Johnny's pathos and deformity, or did he, neurologically predisposed to pathos and deformity, love reading about Johnny because Johnny was pathetic and deformed?

I don't know, but I suspect that both models apply. In any event, there was something wonderful about finding this book when I did. The dense language was like a code, a code I could break, a code that turned out to be more accurate and expressive than the one we all use to slog through normal life. And there was something about the pleasure of carrying around all that coded language in a heavy, hardcovered package that made me think I might someday be able to create my own code: a premonition that my complicated feelings about life could be subjugated to that quest, which has turned out to be true.

ment I heard a door slam, then her voice and Dubinion's voice, and I went back to preparing myself for Lawrenceville and saving my life. Though I think I knew what she meant. She meant my father did only what pleased him, and believed (completely wrongly) that doing so permitted others the equal freedom to do what they wanted. Only that is not how the world works, as my mother's life and mine were abundant proof. Other people affect you. It is really no more complicated than that.

My father sat slumped in the bow of the empty skiff at the end of the plank dock. It was the hour before light. He was facing the silent, barely moving surface of Bayou Baptiste, beyond which (though I couldn't see it) was the vacant, quaverous marshland that stretched as far as the Mississippi River itself, west of us, and miles away. My father was bareheaded and seemed to be wearing a tan raincoat. I had not seen him in a year.

The place we were was called Reggio dock, and it was only a rough little boat camp from which fishermen took their charters out in the summer months, and duck hunters like us departed into the marsh by way of the bayou, and where a few shrimpers stored their big boats and nets when their season was off. I had never been to it, but I knew about it from boys at Jesuit who had come here with their fathers, who leased parts of the marsh and had built wooden blinds and stayed in flimsy shacks and stilt houses along the single-lane road down from Violet, Louisiana. It was a famous place to me in the way that hunting camps can be famously mysterious, and seem to have a danger all about them, and represent the good and the unknown, which so rarely combine in life.

My father had not come to get me as he'd said he would. Instead, a yellow taxi with a light on top had stopped in front of our house and a driver came to the door and rang and told me that Mr. McKendall had sent him to drive me to Reggio—which was in St. Bernard Parish, and for all its wildness not very far from the Garden District.

"And is that really you?" my father said from the boat, turning around, after I had stood on the end of the wooden dock for a minute waiting for him to notice me. A small, stunted-looking man with a large square head and wavy black hair and wearing coveralls was lugging canvas bags full of duck decoys down to the boat. Around the camp there was activity. Cars were arriving in the darkness, their tail-lights brightening. Men's voices could be heard laughing. Someone had brought a dog that occasionally barked. And it was not cold, in spite of being the week before Christmas. The morning air felt heavy and velvety, and a light fog had risen off the bayou, which smelled as if oil or gasoline had been let into it. The mist clung to my hands and face, and made my hair under my cap feel soiled. "I'm sorry about the taxi ride," my father said from the bow of the aluminum skiff. He was smiling in an exaggerated way. His teeth were very white. He looked thin. His pale, fine hair was cut shorter and seemed yellower than I remembered it, and had a wider part on the side. It was odd, but I remember thinking—standing looking down at my father—that if he had had an older brother this was what that brother would look like. Not good. Not happy or wholesome. And of course I realized he was drinking, even at that hour. The man in the coveralls brought down three shotgun cases and laid them in the boat. "This little yat rascal is Mr. Rey-nard Theriot, Jr.," my father said, motioning to the small, wavy-haired man. "There are *some* people of course who know him as Fabrice. Or Fabree-chay. Take your pick."

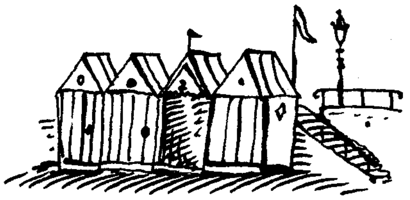
I didn't know what this meant. But Renard, Jr., paused after setting the guns in the boat and looked at my father in an unfriendly way. He had a heavy, rucked brow, and even in that poor light a dark complexion, which made his eyes seem small and penetrating. Under his coveralls, he was wearing a red shirt that had tiny gold stars on it. "Fabree-chay is a duck caller of surprising subtlety," my father said too loudly. "Among, we say, his other talents. Isn't that right, Mr. Fabrice? Did you say hello to my son, Buck, who's a very fine boy?" My father flashed his big smile around at me, and I could tell he was taunting Renard, Jr., who did not speak to me but continued his job to load the boat. I wondered how much he knew about my father, and what he thought if he knew everything.

"I couldn't locate my proper hunting attire," my father said, and looked down at the open front of his topcoat. He pulled it apart, and I saw he was wearing a tuxedo with a pink shirt, a bright-red bow tie, and a pink carnation. He was also wearing white-and-black spectator shoes, which were wrong for the Christmas season and in any case would be ruined once we were in the marsh. "I had them stored in the garage at Mother's," he said, as if talking to himself. "This morning quite early I found I'd lost the key." He looked at me, still smiling. "You have on very good brown things, though." I had just worn my khaki pants and shirt from school—minus the insignias—and black tennis shoes and an old canvas jacket I'd found in a closet. This was not exactly duck hunting in the fashion I had heard about from my school friends. My father had not even been to bed, had been up drinking and having a good time. Probably he would've preferred staying wherever he'd been, with people who were his friends now.

"What important books have you been reading," my father said for some reason, from down in the boat. He looked around as a boat full of hunters with a big black dog motored slowly past down Bayou Baptiste. Their guide had a sealed-beam light he was shining out on the water's misted surface. They were going to shoot ducks, though beyond the opposite bank of the bayou was only the flat treeless expanse that ended in darkness.

"I'm reading 'The Inferno,' " I said and felt self-conscious for saying "Inferno" out here.

"Oh that," my father said. "I believe that's Mr. Fabrice's favorite book. Canto Five: those who've lost the power of restraint. I think you should read Yeats's autobiography, though. I've been reading it in St. Louis. Yeats says in a letter to his friend the great John Synge that we should unite stoicism, asceticism, and ecstasy. I think that would be good, don't you?" My father seemed to be assured and challenging, as if he expected me to know what he meant by these things, and who Yeats was, and Synge. But I didn't know. And I didn't care to pretend I did to a drunk wearing a tuxedo and a pink carnation in a duck boat.



"I don't know them. I don't know what those things are," I said and felt terrible to have to admit it.

"They're the perfect balance for life. All I've been able to arrange are two, however. Maybe one and a half. And how's your mother?" My father began buttoning his overcoat.

"She's fine," I lied.

"I understand she's taken on new household help." He did not look up, just kept fiddling with his buttons.

"She's learning to sing," I said, leaving Dubinion out of it.

"Oh well," my father said, getting the last button done and brushing off the front of his coat. "She always had a nice little voice. A sweet church voice." He smiled, as if he knew I didn't like what he was saying and didn't care.

"She's gotten much better now." I thought about going home right then.

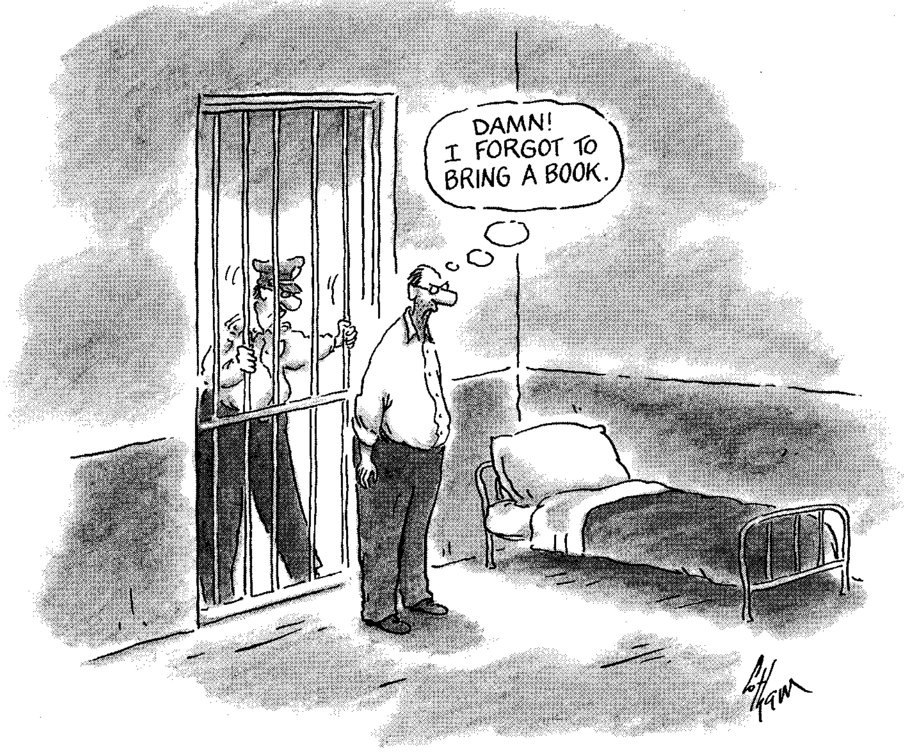
"I'm sure she has. Now get us going here, Fabree-chay," my father said suddenly.

Renard was behind me on the dock. The other boats of hunters had already departed. I could see their lights twitching back and forth over the water, heading away from where we were still tied up, the soft *putt-putts* of their outboards muffled by the mist. I stepped down into the boat, and Renard came in behind me, and the boat tilted radically to one side as my father took a long drink out of a pint bottle he had stationed between his feet, out of sight.

"Don't go fall in, baby," Renard said to my father from the rear of the boat as he was giving the motor cord a strong pull, his voice tinged with sarcasm. "I don't know anybody who'd be willing to pull you out."

My father, I think, did not hear him. But I heard him. And I thought he was certainly right.

I cannot tell you precisely where we went in Renard, Jr.,'s boat that morning, only that it was out into the dark marshy terrain that is the Grand Lake and is in Plaquemines Parish. Later,


DAMN!
I FORGOT TO
BRING A BOOK.

when the sun rose and the mist was extinguished, what I saw was a great surface of gray-brown water broken by low, yellow-grass islands where it smelled like tar and vegetation rankly decomposing, and the mud was blue-black and adhesive. And on the horizon, illuminated by the morning light, were the visible buildings of the city—including the Hibernia Bank building, where my father's office had been—nudged just above the earth's curve. It was strange to feel so outside civilization, and yet to see it.

Of course, at the beginning it was dark. Renard, Jr., being small, could stand up in the rear of the sliding boat and shine his light over me, in the middle, and my father hunched in the bow. My father's blond hair lit up brightly and stayed back off his face in the breeze. We went for a ways down the bayou, then turned and motored slowly under a wooden bridge and then out along a wide canal bordered by swamp hummocks where white herons were roosting and the first ducks of those we hoped to shoot went swimming away from the boat and out of the light, springing suddenly up into the shadows and disappearing. My father pointed at these startled ducks, made a gun out of his fingers, and jerked one-two-three silent shots as the skiff hurtled along through the marsh.

Naturally, I was thrilled to be there—even in my hated military-school clothes with my drunk father dressed in his tuxedo and the little monkey that Renard was operating the boat. I believed, though, that this had to be some version of what the real thing felt like—hunting ducks with your father and a guide—and that anytime you went, even under the most perfect circumstances, there would always be something imperfect that would leave you feeling not exactly good. The trick was to get used to that feeling, or risk missing what little happiness there really was.

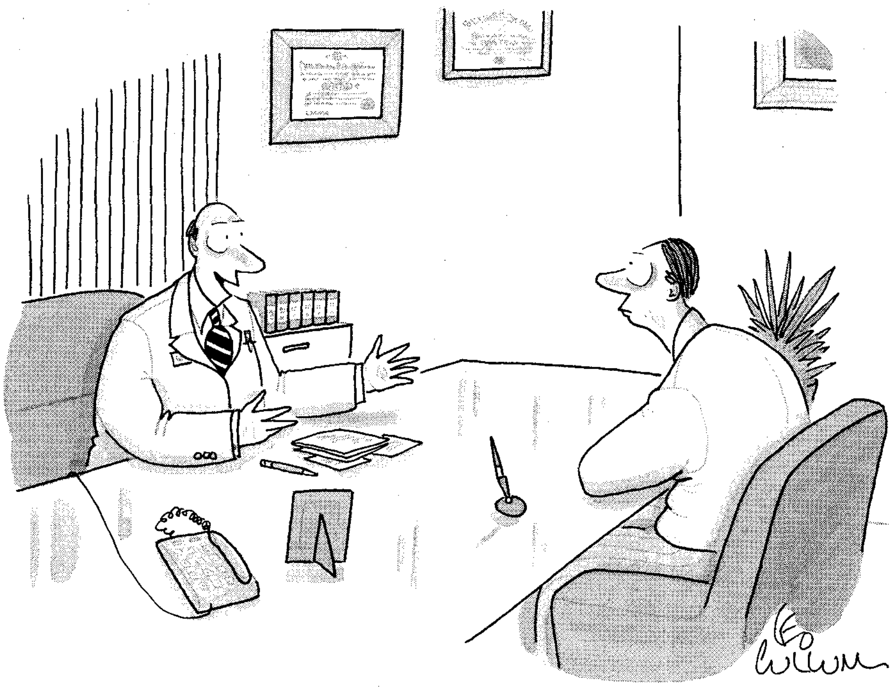
At a certain point when we were buzzing along the smooth surface of the lake, Renard, Jr., abruptly backed off the motor, cut his beam light, turned the boat's nose hard left, and let the wake carry us straight into an island of marsh grass I hadn't made out. I then saw this was not simply an island but also a grass-front blind, built of wood palings driven into the mud, and where peach crates were lined up inside for hunters to sit and not be seen by flying ducks. As the skiff nosed into the grass bank, Renard, now in a pair of hip waders, was out heeling us farther up onto the solider mud. "It's duck heaven here," my father said, then suddenly coughed densely, his young man's smooth face becoming stymied by a gasp, so that he had to shake his head and turn away.

"He means it's the place where ducks go to heaven," Renard said. It was the first thing he'd said to me, and I was surprised by how much his voice did not sound like the yat voices I'd heard and that supposedly sound like citizens of New York or Boston—cities of the North. Renard's voice was cultivated and mellow and inflected, I thought, like some uptown funeral director's, or a florist's. It seemed to be a voice better suited to a different body from the tough, muscular, gnarly little man up to his thighs in filmy, strong-smelling water, and with a long wavy white-trash hair style.

"When do the ducks come here," I said, only to have something to say back. My father was recovering himself, spitting in the water and taking another drink off his bottle.

Renard laughed a private little laugh he must have thought my father would hear. "When they ready to come. Just like you and me," he said, and began hauling out the big canvas decoy sacks, and seemed to quit noticing me entirely.

Renard had a wooden pirogue hidden back in the thick grasses, and, when he had covered our skiff with a blanket made of straw mats, he used the pirogue to set out decoys as the sky lightened, though where we were was still dark. My father and I sat side by side on the peach boxes and watched Renard tossing out the weighted duck bodies so as to make two groups in front of our blind, with a space of open water in between. I could see now that what I'd imagined the marsh to look like was different from how it was. For one thing, the expanse of water around us was smaller. A line of green trees had appeared in the distance across the marsh, closer than I had expected, and I could hear some music that must've come from a car at the Reggio boat dock. And eventually there was the sun, a white disk burning behind the mist,



"There are many questions, of course, that won't be answered till the autopsy."

• •

and from a part of the marsh entirely opposite from where I first expected it. In truth, though, all of these things—these confusing and disorienting and reversing features of where I was—seemed good, since they made me feel placed, so that in time I forgot the unsatisfactory ways I had been feeling about the day and about life and about my future, which did not seem so good.

Inside the blind, which was only ten feet long and four feet wide and had spent shells and candy wrappers and cigarette butts on the planks, my father displayed his pint bottle of whiskey, which was three-quarters empty. He sat for a time when we were arranged on our crates, and said nothing to me, or to Renard, who had finished distributing the decoys and climbed into the blind to await the ducks. Something seemed to have come over my father, a great fatigue or ill-feeling or a suddenly preoccupying thought that removed him from the moment and from what we were doing there. Renard unsheathed the guns from their cases. Mine was the old A. H. Fox twenty-gauge double gun, heavy as lead, which I had seen in my grandmother's house many times and had handled enough to know the particulars of without ever shooting it. My grandmother had called it her "ladies' gun," and she had shot it when she was young and had gone hunting with my father's father. Renard gave me six cartridges, and I loaded the chambers and kept the gun muzzle pointed up from between my knees as we watched the sky and waited for the ducks to try our decoys.

My father did not load his gun but just sat propped against the wooden laths of the blind, with his shotgun leaned on the grassy mat. After a while of watching and seeing only a pair of ducks operating far out of range, we heard other hunters begin to take their shots, sometimes several at a terrible burst. I realized then that there were two other blinds across the pond we were set down on—three hundred yards from us, but visible when my eyes adjusted to the light and the distinguishing irregularities of the horizon. A single duck I'd watched fly across the sky flared at the other hunters' shooting but then abruptly collapsed and fell straight down, and I heard a dog bark and a man's voice, high-pitched and laughing through the soft air. "Hoo, hoo, hoo, ooh lawd," the voice said. "That mutha-scootch was all the way to Terre Bonne Parish when I hit him." Another man laughed. It all seemed very close to us, even though we had not shot and were merely scanning the milky skies.

"Coon-ass bastards," my father suddenly said. "Jumpin' the shooting time. They have to do that. It's genetic." He was addressing no one, just sitting leaned against the blind's sides, waiting.

"Already been shootin' time," Renard, Jr., said. He was wearing two wooden duck calls looped to his neck on leather thongs. He had yet to blow one, but I wanted him to, wanted to see a V of ducks turn and veer and come into our decoy set, the way they were supposed to.

"Now, is that so, Mr. Grease-Fabrice, Mr. Fabree-chay," my father said. He wiped the back of his hand across his nose and up into his hair, then closed his eyes and opened them wide, as if he were trying to fasten his attention to what we were doing but did not find it easy. The blind smelled of his whiskey, and of whatever ointment Renard, Jr., used on his thick hair. My father had already got his black-and-white shoes muddy and scratched, and there was mud on his tuxedo pants and his pink shirt and even on his forehead. He was an unusual-looking figure to be where he was. He seemed to have been dropped out of an airplane on the way to a party.

Renard, Jr., did not answer back to my father's calling him Grease-Fabrice. It was clear he wouldn't like a name like that, and I wondered why he would even be here to be talked to that way. And of course there was a reason. Very few things in the world are actually mysterious. Most things have disappointing explanations somewhere behind them, no matter how strange they seem at first.

After a while, Renard produced a package of cigarettes, put one in his mouth, but did not light it—just held it between his damp lips, which were big and sensuous. He was already an odd-looking man, with his star shirt, his head too big for his body—a man who was probably in his forties and had just missed being a dwarf.

"Now, there's the true sign of the yat," my father said sarcastically. He was leaning on his shotgun now, concentrating on Renard, Jr. "Notice the unlit cigarette pooched out the front of the too expressive mouth. If you drive the streets of Chalmette, Louisiana, sonny, you'll see men and women and children who are all actually blood-related to Mr. Fabrice, standing in their little postage-stamp yards wearing hip boots with unlighted Picayunes in their mouths just like you see now. Ecce homo."

Renard, Jr., unexpectedly opened his mouth with his cigarette somehow stuck to the top of his big ugly purple tongue. He cast an eye at my father, leaning forward against his shotgun, smirking, and quickly flicked the cigarette backward into his mouth and swallowed it without changing his expression. Then he looked at me, sitting between him and my father, and smiled. His teeth were big and brown-stained. It was a lewd act. I didn't know how it was lewd, but I was sure it was.

"Pay no attention to him," my father said. "These are people we have to deal with. French acts, carny types, brutes. Now I want you to tell me about yourself, Buck. Are there any impossible situations you find yourself in these days? I've become expert in impossible situations lately." My father shifted his feet on the muddy board floor, and his shotgun, which was a beautiful Beretta over-under with silver inlays, suddenly slipped and fell right across my feet with a loud clatter—the barrels ending up pointed straight at Renard, Jr.'s, knees. My father did not even try to grab the gun as it fell.

"Pick that up right now," he said to me in an angry voice, as if I had dropped his gun. But I did. I picked the gun up and handed it back to him, and he penned it to the side of the blind with his knee. Something in the sudden, almost violent way he put his gun where he wanted it reminded me of himself before a year ago. He had always been a man for abrupt moves and changes of attitude and unexpected laughter and strong emotion. I had not always liked it, but I'd decided that was what men did, and accepted it.

"Do you ever hope to travel?" my father said, ignoring his other question, looking up at the low sky as if he'd just realized he was in a duck blind and, for a second at least, was involved in the things we were doing. His topcoat had sagged open, and his tuxedo front was visible, smudged with mud. "You should," he said before I could answer.

Renard, Jr., began to blow on his duck call then, and crouched forward in front of his peach crate. And, because he did, I crouched in front of mine, and my father—noticing us—squatted on his knees, too, and averted his face, as if he were praying. After a few moments of Renard, Jr.,'s calling, I peered over the straw wall of the blind and could see two black-colored ducks flying right in front of our blind and low over our decoys. Renard, Jr., changed his calling sound to a broken cackle, and when he did the ducks suddenly swerved to the side and began winging hard away from us, almost as if they could fly backward.

"You let 'em seen you," Renard said in a hoarse whisper. "They seen that white face." I could smell his breath, crouched beside him. It was a smell of cigarettes and sour meat and must've tasted terrible in his mouth.

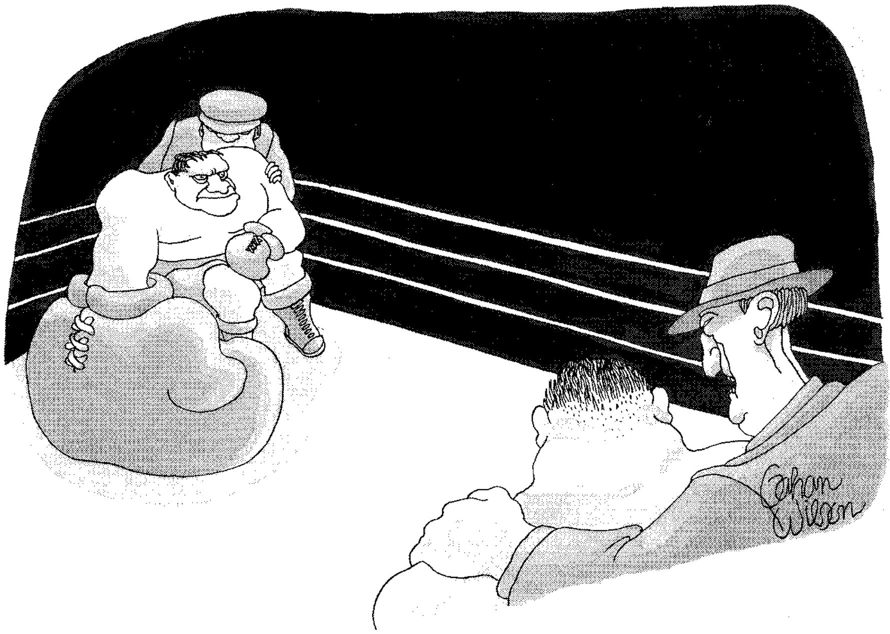
"Call, God damn it, Fabrice," my father said then, shouted really. I twisted around to see him, and he was right up on his two feet, his gun to his shoulder, his topcoat lying on the floor so that he was just in his tuxedo. I looked out at our decoys and saw four small ducks cupping their wings and gliding toward the water where Renard had left it open. Their wings made a pinging sound.

Renard, Jr., immediately started his cackle call again, still crouched, his face down. "Shoot 'em, Buck, shoot 'em," my father shouted at me, and I stood up and got my heavy gun to my shoulder, and without meaning to fired both barrels, pulled both triggers at once, just as my father (who at some moment had loaded his gun) also fired one then the other barrel at the ducks, which had briefly touched the water but were already heading off, climbing up and up as the others had, flying backward away from us, their necks outstretched, their eyes—or so it seemed to me, who had never shot at a duck—wide and frightened.

My two barrels, fired together, had hit one of Renard's decoys and shattered it to pieces. My father's two shots had hit, it seemed, nothing at all, though one of the gray paper wads drifted back toward the water while the four ducks grew small in the distance until they were shot at by the other hunters across the pond and two of them dropped.

"That was completely terrible," my father said, standing at the end of the blind in his tuxedo and red tie, his hair slicked close down on his head in a way that made him resemble a child. He quickly broke his gun open and replaced the spent shells with new ones from his tuxedo-coat pocket. He seemed no longer drunk but completely engaged and sharp-minded, except for having missed everything.

"Y'all shot like a couple of ole grand-



"Watch out for his right, kid!"

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

At the hayfield's edge, a few stalks
of grass are twitching; I bend close
and find the plump body of the vole.
He's dead, I flung him here myself,
after snapping him in a mousetrap to halt
his forays through the flower beds. Yet now
he lives: he jerks, he heaves, he shudders,
as if the process of decomposition
had quickened in him and turned violent,
or he were struggling with something
blocking an attempt at resurrection—
or could it be that something
unimaginable happens, something
worse than death, after death.

I prog him, tilt him, peer under him
and see: he's being buried, by beetles—
bright-yellow or red chevrons
laid across their black wings—
carrion beetles, sexton beetles,
corpse-eating buriers who delve
and undergrub him, howking out
the trench his sausagey form settles into.

Now a beetle moils across him,
spewing at both ends, drooking him
in chemical juices. The reek of him
is heavy, swampy, surely savory,
luring from afar not only beetles
but those freeloaders of the afterlife
the midden flies, who arrive
and drop their eggs in, too,
before the covering of the grave.

Scummaging down into an ever
more formfitting last resting place,
the vole by now has dwelt almost
a full day in death, and yet somehow he's
still looking good. His gape drawn back,
he bares his teeth: uppers
stubby and old-folks yellow, lowers
an inch long, curled inward, like uppers
of beavers if forced to subsist on soft food.
At the last day, when souls go back
to their graves and resume the form
and flesh once theirs, this one
could jump and jig, as if simply
risen from a good night's dead sloom.

The flies' eggs hatch, the larvae squirm
in and out of the eyeholes; in and out
of the ears; in and out of the snout,
which slorped too often the airy auras
of our garden flowers; in and out of the mouth,
which, even cluttered with bent choppers,
snipped flowers and dragged the blossoms
stem first through gaps in the stone wall—
all but the peony blossom, which stuck
and stoppered the hole for a week
like a great gorgeous cork; and in and out
of the anus, like revenant turds,
that go in to practice going out.

The last half of the vole's tail
still sticks out, as if it might be left
that way, like a stalk of grass, to make
the site look natural. At the grave's edge
a cricket stands in glittering black,
ogling it all. Shocking to find
this hearth critter here, like a Yankee
town father spectating at a cross burning.

A larger beetle, the pronotum behind
her head brilliant red, noggles
into view; pushing the grass down
on either side she plouters
without pause past the tobacco-ish
teeth and down into the underroom
of the self-digesting birth banquet,
to deposit her eggs, to wait, and then
to peel tidbits from the carcass and feed
her hatchlings mouth to mouth, like a bird.

Soon this small plot will be unfindable:
every blade of grass will look
like a vole's tail, every smither
of ungrassed earth like burial ground,
day won't feel exactly like day, nor night
like night, and in the true night,
when we have our other, more lunatic day,
I may hear in the dunch of blood
a distant, comforting, steady shovelling,
but I will know—when a human body
is drained of its broths and filled
again with formaldehyde and salts,
or unguents and aromatic oils, and pranked
up in its holiday best and laid out
in a satin-lined airtight stainless-steel
coffin and stowed in a leakproof concrete vault—
I will know that if no fellow-creatures
can pry their way in to do the underdigging
and jiggling and earthing over and mating
and egg laying and birthing forth,
then the most that can come to pass
will be a centuries-long withering
down to a gowpen of dead dust, and not ever
the crawling of new life out of the old,
which is what we have for eternity on earth.

—*Galway Kinnell*

mas," Renard said, disgusted, shaking his head.

"Fuck you," my father said calmly, and snapped shut his beautiful Italian gun in a menacing way. His blue eyes widened, then narrowed, and I believed he might point his gun at Renard, Jr. White spit had collected in the corners of his mouth, and his face had gone from looking engaged to looking pale and damp and outraged. "If I need your services for other than calling, I'll speak to your owner," he said.

"Speak to your own owner, snooky," Renard, Jr., said, and when he said this he looked at me, raised his eyebrows, smiled, and pushed his heavy lips forward in a cruel, simian way.

"That's enough," my father said loudly. "That is absolutely enough." I thought he might reach past me then and strike Renard in the mouth he was smiling through. But he didn't. He surprisingly just sat back on his peach crate, faced forward, and held his newly reloaded shotgun between his knees. His little pink carnation was flattened in the greasy mud.

I could hear my father's hard breathing. Something had happened that wasn't good, but I didn't know what. Something had risen up in him, some force of sudden rebellion, but it had been defeated before it could come out and act. Or so it seemed to me. Silent events always occur between our urges and our actions. These events are parts of our important hidden lives. But I did not know what event had just occurred, only that one had, and I could feel it. My father seemed tired now, and to be considering something. Renard, Jr., was no longer calling ducks, and was just sitting at his end, staring at the misty sky, which was turning dense and luminous red at the horizon, as if a fire were burning at the far edge of the marsh. Shooting in the other blinds had stopped. A small plane traced across the sky. I saw a fish roll in the water in front of the blind. I thought I saw an alligator. Mosquitoes appeared, which is never unusual in Louisiana.

"What do you do in St. Louis?" I said to my father. It was the thing I wanted to know.

"Well," my father said thoughtfully. He sniffed. "Golf. I play quite a bit of golf. Francis has a big house across from a wonderful park. I've taken it up." He felt his forehead where a mosquito had landed on a black muddy stain that was there. He rubbed it and looked at his fingertips.

"Will you practice law up there?" I asked.

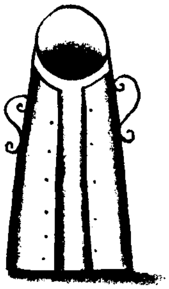
"Oh lord no," he said and shook his head and sniffed again. "They requested me to leave the firm here. You know that."

"Yes," I said. His breathing was easier. His face seemed calm. He looked handsome and youthful. Whatever silent event that had occurred had passed off, and he seemed settled about it. I thought I might talk about going to Lawrenceville. Duck blinds were where people had such conversations. Though I thought it would've been better if we'd been alone, and didn't have Renard, Jr., to overhear us. "I'd like to ask you . . . ," I began.

"Tell me about your girlfriend situation," my father interrupted me. "Tell me the whole story there."

I knew what he meant by that, but there wasn't a story. I was in military school, and there were only other boys present, which was not a story to me. If I went to Lawrenceville, however, I thought there could be a story. Girls would be nearby. "There isn't any story," I started, and he interrupted me again.

"Let me give you some advice." He was rubbing his index finger around the blue muzzle of his Italian shotgun. "Always try to imagine how you're going to feel after you fuck somebody before you fuck somebody. *Comprendes*? There's the key to everything. History. Morality. Philosophy. You save yourself a lot of misery." He nodded as if this wisdom had become clear to him all over again. "Maybe you already know that," he said. He looked up above the front of the blind, where the sky had turned to fire, then looked at me in a way to seem honest and to say (so I thought) that he liked me. And then he said, "Do you ever find yourself saying things in conversations that you absolutely don't believe?" He reached with his two fingers and plucked a mosquito off my cheek. "Do you," he said and seemed amused. "Do ya, do ya, do ya?"



I thought of conversations I'd had with Dubinion, and some I'd had with my mother. They were that kind of conversation—memorable if only for the things I didn't say. But what I said to my father was "No."

"Convenience must not matter much to you then," he said in a friendly way.

"I don't know if it does or not," I said because I didn't know what convenience meant. It was a word I'd never had a cause to use.

"Well, convenience matters to me very much. Too much, I think," my father said. I thought then of my mother's assessment of my father—that he was not better than most men. I assumed that caring too much for convenience led you there, and that my fault in later life could turn out to be the same one because he was my father. But I decided to see to it that my fault in life would not be his, if I possibly could. "There's one ducky duck," my father said. He was watching the sky and seemed bemused. "Fabrice, would you let me apologize for acting ugly to you, and ask you to call. How generous that would be of you. How nice." My father smiled strangely at Renard, Jr., who had seemed to be brooding.

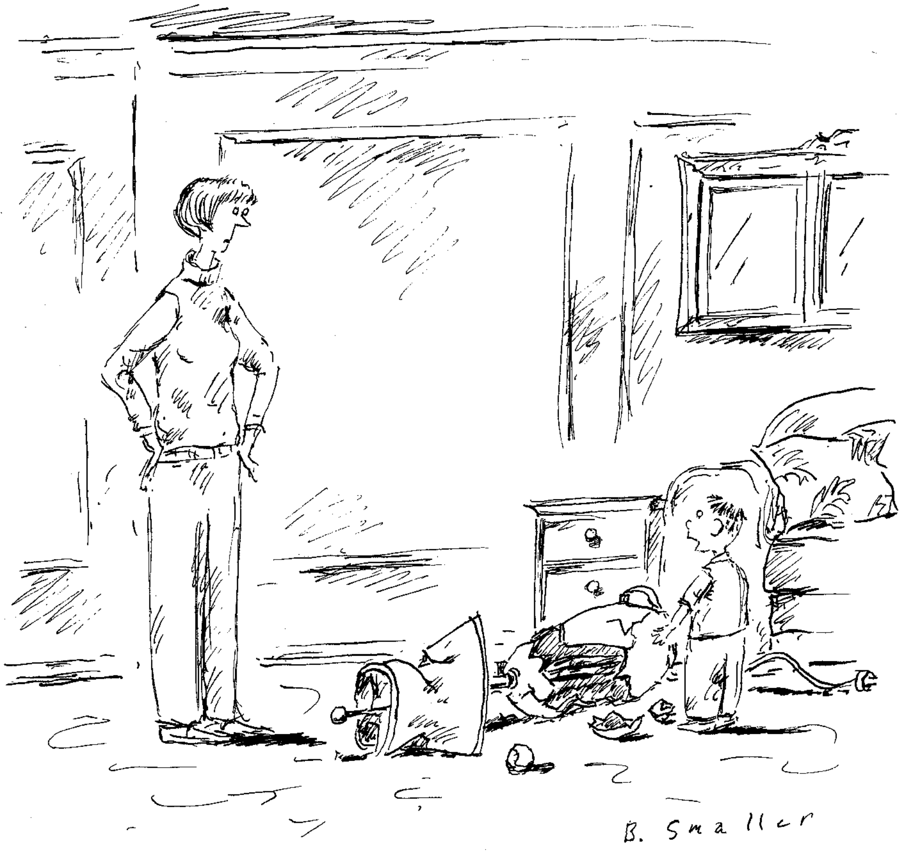
And Renard, Jr., did call. I did not see a duck. But when my father squatted down on the dirty planking where his topcoat was smeared and our empty shell casings were littered, I did, too, and turned my face toward the floor. I could hear my father's breathing, could feel the whiskey thick on his breath, could see his wet knuckles supporting him unsteadily on the boards, could even smell his hair, which was warm and musty. It was as close as I would come to him. And I decided that it would have to do, might even be the best there could be.

"Wait now, wait on 'im," my father said, hunkered against the rough planks but actually looking up from the tops of his eyes. He put his fingers on my hand to make me be still. I had not seen anything. Renard, Jr., was calling his long, high-pitched rasping incessant call, followed by many short bursts that made him grunt in his throat in a way I hadn't noticed before, and then the long high call again. "Not quite yet," my father whispered. "Not yet. Wait on him." I turned my face sideways to see up, my eyes cut to the corners to find something. "No," my father said, close to my ear. "Don't look up." I inhaled deeply and breathed in all the smells again that came off my father. And then Renard, Jr., said loudly, "Go on, Jesus! Go on! Shoot 'im. Shoot now. Whatchyouwaitin'on?"

And I stood up then without knowing what I would see, and brought my shotgun to my shoulder before I really looked. And what I saw, coming low over the decoys, its own head turning to the side and peering down at the brown water, was one lone duck. I could distinguish its green head and dark bullet eyes in the haze-burnt morning light and could hear its wings pinging. I did not think it saw me or heard my father and Renard, Jr., shouting, "Shoot, shoot, oh Jesus, shoot, Buck!" Because when my face and gun barrel appeared above the front of the blind, it did not change its course or begin the backward-upward maneuvering I'd seen, which was its way to save itself. It just kept looking down and flying slowly and making its noise in the reddened air above the water and all of us.

And, as I found the duck above my barrel tops, my eyes opened wide in the way I knew you shot such a gun, and I thought: It's only one duck. There may not be any others. What's the good of one duck shot down? In my dreams there'd been hundreds of ducks, and my father and I shot them so that they fell like rain, and how many there were would not have mattered because we were doing it together. But I was doing this alone, and one duck seemed wrong, and to matter in a way a hundred ducks wouldn't have, at least if I was going to be the one to shoot. So that what I did was not shoot, and lowered my gun.

"What's wrong?" my father said from the floor below me, still on all fours in his wrecked tuxedo, his face turned down, awaiting a gun's report. The lone duck was past us now, quickly out of range.



"What do I think is an appropriate punishment? I think an appropriate punishment would be to make me live with my guilt."

I looked at Renard, Jr., who was seated on his peach crate, small enough not to need to hunker. He looked at me, and made a strange face, a face I'd never seen but will never forget. He smiled, and he began to bat his eyelids in fast succession, and he raised his two hands, palms up, to the level of his eyes, as if he expected something to fall down into them, or as if he were praying. I don't know what that gesture meant, though I have thought of it often—sometimes in the middle of a night when my sleep is disturbed. Derision, I think; or possibly it meant he merely didn't know why I had not shot the duck and was awaiting my answer. Or possibly it was something else, some sign whose significance I would never know. Fabrice was a strange man. No one would've doubted it.

My father was up on his muddy feet suddenly, although with difficulty. He had his shotgun to his shoulder, and he shot once at the duck. And of course it did not fall. Then he stared for a time with his gun to his shoulder until the speck of duck wings disappeared.

"What the hell happened," he said, his face red from kneeling and bending. "Why didn't you shoot that duck?" His mouth was opened into a frown. I could see his white teeth, and his two hands were gripping the sides of the blind. He seemed to be in jeopardy of falling down. He was, after all, still drunk. His blond hair shone in the misty light.

"I wasn't close enough," I said.

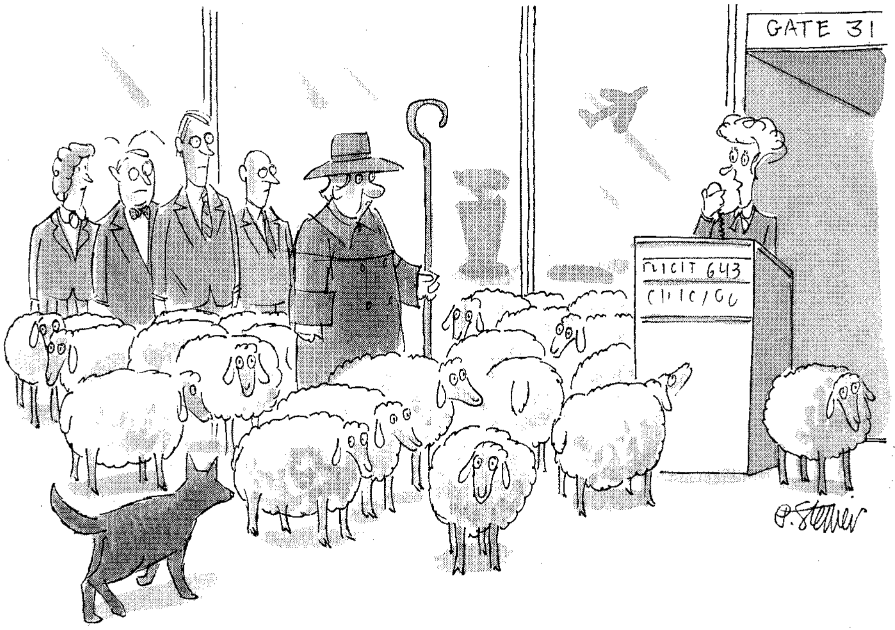
My father looked around again at the decoys as if they could prove something. "Wasn't close enough?" he said. "I heard the damn duck's wings. How close do you need it? You've got a gun there."

"You couldn't hear it," I said.

"Couldn't hear it?" he said. His eyes rose off my face and found Renard, Jr., behind me. His mouth took on an odd expression. The scowl left his features, and he looked amused, the damp corners of his mouth revealing a small, flickering smile I was sure was also derision and that represented his view that I had balked at a crucial moment, made a mistake, and didn't therefore have to be treated so seriously. This from a man who had left my mother and me to fend for ourselves while he disported without dignity or shame out of sight of those who knew him.

"You don't know anything," I suddenly said. "You're only . . ." And I don't know what I was about to say. Something terrible and hurtful. Something to strike out at him and that I would've regretted forever. So that I didn't say any more, didn't finish it. Though I did that for myself, I think now, and not for him, so that I would not have to regret more than I already regretted. I didn't really care what happened to him, to be truthful. Didn't and don't.

And then my father said, the insinuating smile on his handsome lips, "Come on, sonny boy. You've still got some growing up to do, I can see." He reached for me and put his hand behind my neck, which was rigid in anger and loathing. And, without seeming to notice, he pulled me to him and kissed me on my forehead, and put his arms around me and held me until whatever he was thinking had passed and it was time for us to go back to the dock.



"If you are travelling with small children or if you just need a little extra time, we invite you to board the aircraft at this time."

My father lived thirty years after that morning in December, on the Grand Lake, in 1961. By any accounting he lived a whole life after that. And I am not interested in the whys and why nots of what he did and didn't do, or in causing that day to seem life-changing for me, because it surely wasn't. Life had already changed. That morning represented just the first working out of particulars I would evermore observe. Like my father, I am a lawyer. And the law teaches you that most of life is about adjustments, the seatings and reseatings we perform to accommodate events occurring outside our control and over which we might not have sought control in the first place. So that when I am tempted, as I was for an instant in the blind, or as I was through all those thirty years, to let myself become preoccupied and angry with my father, or when I see a man who reminds me of him, stepping into some building in a seersucker suit and bright bow tie, it is best just to offer myself release and to realize I am feeling anger all alone, and that there is no redress. We want it. Life can be seen to be about almost nothing else sometimes than our wish for redress. As a lawyer who is the son of a lawyer and grandson of another, I know this. And I also know not to expect it.

For the record—because I never saw him again—my father went back to St. Louis and back under the influence of Dr. Carter, who I believe was as strong a character as my father was weak. They lived on there for a time until (I was told) Dr. Carter quit the practice of medicine entirely. Then they left St. Louis and travelled to Paris and after that to a bright white stucco house near Antibes, which I in fact once saw, completely by accident, on a side tour during a business trip, and somehow knew to be his abode the instant I came to it, as though I had dreamed it—but then couldn't get away from it fast enough, though they were both dead and buried by then.

Once, in our newspaper, early in the nineteen-seventies, I saw my father pictured in the society section amid a group of smiling, handsome crewcut men, again wearing tuxedos, and red sashes of some foolish kind, and holding champagne glasses. They were men in their fifties, all of whom seemed, by their smiles, to want very badly to be younger.

Seeing this picture reminded me that in the days after my father had taken me to the marsh, and events had ended not altogether happily, I had prayed for one of the first times, but also for the last time, in my life. I prayed quite fervently for a while, and in spite of all, that he would come back to us and our life would begin to be as it had been. And then I prayed that he would die, and die in a way I would never know about, and his memory would cease to be a memory, and all would be erased. My mother died a rather sudden and pointless death not long afterward, and many people including myself attributed her death to him. In time, my father came and went in and out of New Orleans, just as if neither of us had ever known each other.

And so the memory was not erased. Yet, because I can tell all of this now, I believe that I have gone on beyond it, to a life better than one might have imagined for me. Of course, I think of that life—mine—as being part of their aftermath, part of the residue of all they risked and squandered. Such things can happen. Possibly they happen in some places more than in others. But they are survivable. I am proof, since, in truth, I have never imagined my life any other way than as it is. ♦

FICTION

IMMORTAL HEART

BY AMY TAN

These are the things I must not forget: I was raised among the Liu clan in the rocky Western Hills south of Peking, in Immortal Heart village. My nursemaid, Precious Auntie, who could speak only by making signs with her hands, taught me how to write the character for heart on my chalkboard. *Watch now, Lu Ling,* she ordered, and began to draw: *See this curving stroke? That's the bottom of the heart, where blood gathers.* And as I traced the character, she asked, *Whose dead heart gave shape to this word? How did it begin?*

Immortal Heart village lay in a valley that dropped into a deep limestone ravine. The ravine was shaped like the curved chamber of a heart, and the three streams that had once fed and drained the ravine were the heart's artery and veins. Now nothing was left of the waterways but cracked gullies and the stench of a fart.

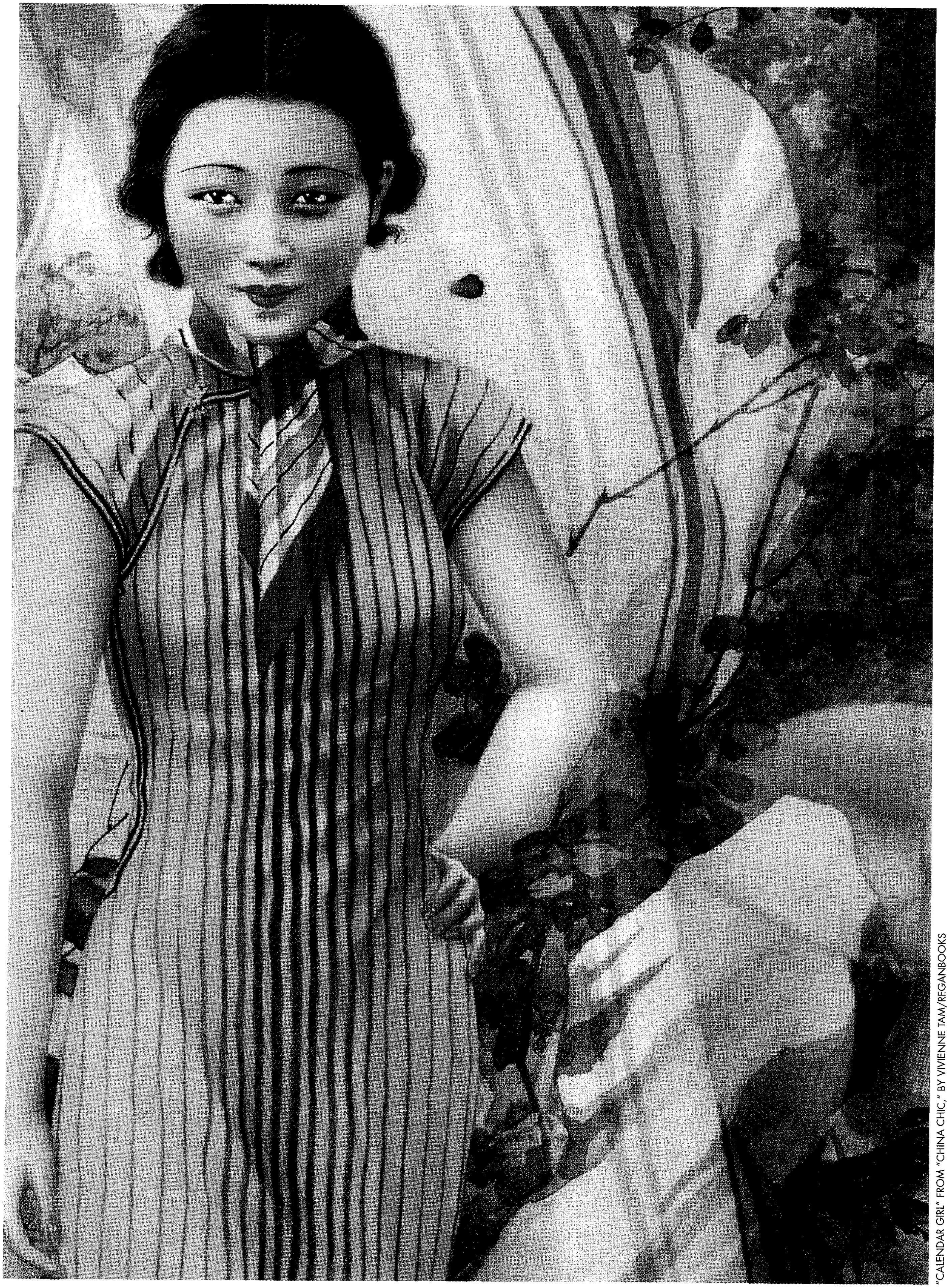
The Liu clan had lived in Immortal Heart for six centuries. During that time, they had been ink stick makers who sold their goods to travellers. All in all, our family was successful—we now had a shop in Peking, where Father and his brothers and their sons worked—but not so successful that we caused great envy. The family home, on Pig's Head Lane, had grown from a simple house into a compound, with five-pillar wings, and outbuildings perched above the deepest end of the ravine. The Liu family had once owned twenty *mu* of land, but over the centuries, with each heavy rainfall, the walls of the ravine had collapsed and widened, rumbled and deepened, and the cliff crept closer to the back of our house. We called the ravine the End of the World. What lay below was too unlucky to name out loud: unwanted babies, suicide maidens, and beggar ghosts.

Precious Auntie was born in a town called Mouth of the Mountain, in the foothills on the other side of the ravine. In Mouth of the Mountain, poor men collected dragon bones from the nearby caves and then sold them to medicine shops for high prices, and the shops sold them to sick people for still higher prices. The bones were known to cure anything, from wasting diseases to stupidity. Plenty of doctors sold them. And so did Precious Auntie's father, the Famous Bonesetter in the Mouth of the Mountain. He used bones to heal bones.

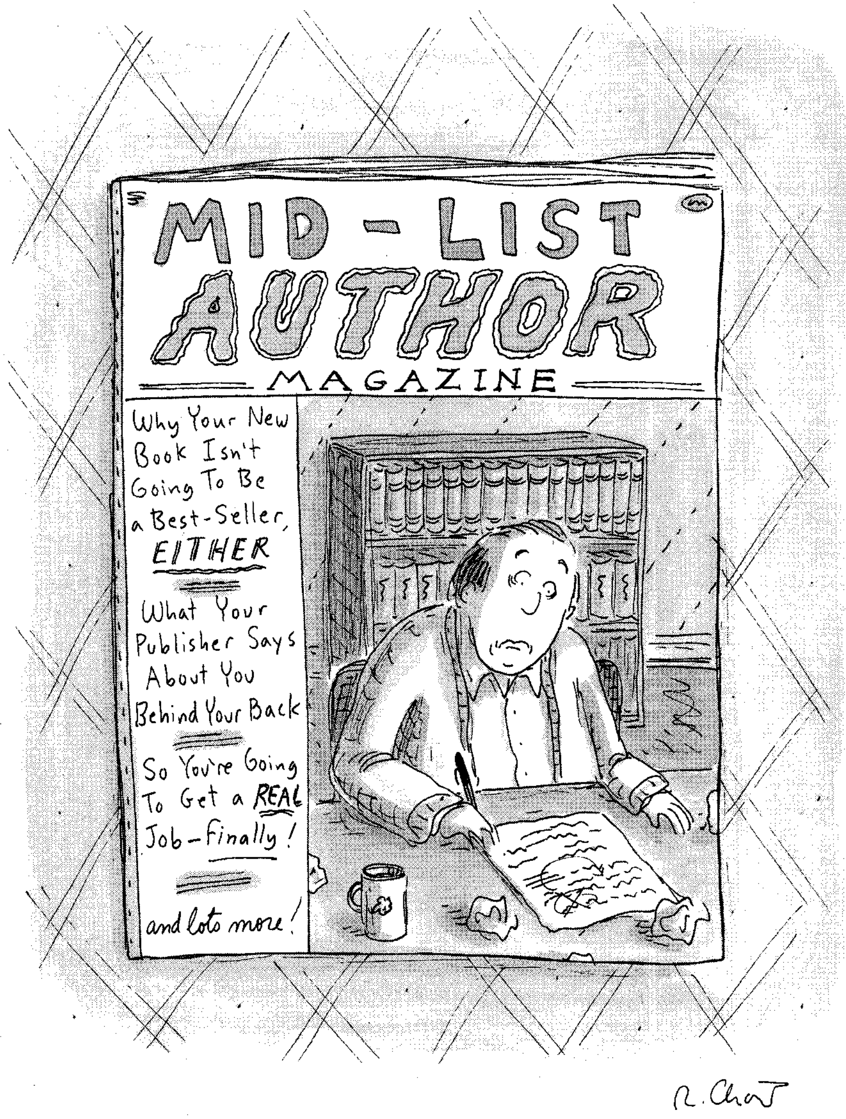
Her father's customers were mostly men and boys who had been injured in the coal mines and limestone quarries. The bonesetter had learned his skill from watching his father, and his father had learned from his father before him. That was their inheritance. They also passed along a secret: the location of a cave called the Monkey's Jaw, where many dragon bones could be found.

I can still remember the directions to the Monkey's Jaw. It was between the Mouth of the Mountain and Immortal Heart, far from the other caves in the foothills, where everyone else went to dig up dragon bones. Precious Auntie took me there several times, always in the spring or the autumn. We went down into the End of the World and walked along the middle of the ravine, away from the walls, where the grown-ups said there were things that were bad to see. Sometimes we passed by a skein of weeds, shards of a bowl, a quagmire of twigs. In my childish mind, those sights became parched flesh, a baby's skull, a soup of maidens' bones.

When we stood in front of the cave itself, a split in the mountain that was no taller than a broom, Precious Auntie pulled aside the dead bushes that hid the entrance. The two of us took big breaths and went in. It was like trying to get inside an ear. By the time I was in



"CALENDAR GIRL" FROM "CHINA CHIC," BY VIVIENNE TAM/REGANBOOKS


MID-LIST AUTHOR MAGAZINE
Why Your New Book Isn't Going To Be a Best-Seller, EITHER
What Your Publisher Says About You Behind Your Back
So You're Going To Get a REAL Job—Finally!
and lots more!

the cave, I was crying and Precious Auntie was grunting to reassure me, because I could not see her inkstained fingers to know what she was saying. I had to follow her handclaps, crawling like a dog so I would not hit my head. When we finally reached the larger part of the cave, Precious Auntie lit the candle lamp and hung it on a pole left by one of her clan long ago.

On the cave's floor, there were digging tools—iron wedges of different sizes, hammers and claws—as well as sacks for dragging out the dirt. The walls of the cave were many layers, like an eight-treasure rice pudding cut in half, with lighter, crumbly things on top, then a thicker, muddy part like bean paste below, growing heavier toward the bottom. After centuries of people's digging, there was an overhang waiting to crash down and bite you in two, which was why the cave was called the Monkey's Jaw.

While we rested, Precious Auntie talked with her inky hands. *Stay away from that side of the monkey's teeth. Once they chomped down on an ancestor, and he was ground up and gobbled down with stones. My father found his skull over there. We put it back right away. Bad luck to separate a man's head from his body.*

Hours later, we climbed back out of the Monkey's Jaw with a sack of dirt and, if we had been lucky, one or two dragon bones. Precious Auntie held them up to the sky and bowed, thanking the gods. The bones from this cave, she believed, were the reason her family had become famous as bonesetters.

Precious Auntie's father was so talented that patients from the five surrounding mountain villages travelled to see him. Skilled and famous though he was, he could not prevent all tragedies. When Precious Auntie was four, her mother and older brothers died of an intestine-draining disease. The bonesetter was so ashamed of being unable to save his own family members that he spent his entire fortune and went into a lifetime of debt to pay for their funerals.

Because of grief, Precious Auntie said with her hands, *he spoiled me, let me do whatever a son might do. I learned to read and write, to ask questions, to play riddle games, to write eight-legged essays, to walk alone and admire nature. The old biddies used to warn him that it was dangerous, and they asked why he didn't bind my feet. My father was used to seeing pain of the worst kinds. But with me he was helpless. He couldn't bear to see me cry.*

So Precious Auntie freely followed her father around in his study and shop. A customer could point to any jar on the shelves and she could read the name of its contents. By the time she passed into maidenhood, she had heard every kind of scream and curse. She had touched so many bodies, living, dying, and dead, that few families would consider her as a bride for their sons.

One night, as we ate dinner in the Liu compound, with Mother, my younger sister Gao Ling, and the rest of the family, Precious Auntie told me a story with her hands, which only I could understand. *A rich lady came to my father and told him to unbind her feet and mold them into modern ones. She said she wanted to wear high-heeled shoes. "But don't make the new feet too big," she said, "not like a slave girl's or a foreigner's. Make them naturally small like hers." And she pointed to my feet.*

I'd forgotten that Mother and my other aunts were at the dinner table, and I said aloud, "Do bound feet look like white lilies, the way the romantic books say?" Mother, who had bound feet, frowned at me. How could I talk so openly about a woman's most private parts? So Precious Auntie pretended to scold me with her hands for asking such a question, but what she really said was this: *They're usually cramped like flower-twist bread. But if they're dirty and knotty with calluses, they look like rotten ginger roots and smell like the snouts of pigs three days dead.*

In this way, Precious Auntie taught

me to be naughty, just like her. She taught me to be curious, just like her. She taught me to be spoiled. And because I was all these things, she could not teach me to be a better daughter, though she tried to.

I remember how she tried. The last week we were together, she did not speak to me. Instead, she wrote and wrote and wrote. Finally she handed me a bundle of pages laced together with cord. *This is my true story, Lu Ling*, she told me, *and yours as well.* Later, when I read them, this is what I learned.

One late-autumn day, when Precious Auntie was nineteen, her Chinese age, her father had two new patients. The first was a screaming baby from a family that lived in Immortal Heart. The second was my father's youngest brother. We called him Baby Uncle. They would both cause Precious Auntie everlasting sorrow, but in entirely different ways.

The bawling baby was the youngest son of a big-chested man named Chang, a coffin-maker who had grown rich in times of plague. The carved outsides of his coffins were camphor wood. But the insides were cheap pine, painted and lacquered to look and smell like the better wood.

Some of that camphor wood had fallen onto the baby and knocked his shoulder out of its socket. That's why the baby was now howling, Chang's wife reported with a frightened face. Two years before, she had visited the bonesetter's shop because her eye and jaw had been broken by a stone that, she said, must have dropped out of the open sky. Now she was here with her husband, who was slapping the baby's leg, telling him to stop his racket. Precious Auntie shouted at Chang, "First the shoulder, now you want to break his leg as well!" Chang scowled. Precious Auntie rubbed a little bit of medicine inside the baby's cheeks. Soon the baby quieted down, yawned once, and fell asleep. Then the bonesetter snapped the small shoulder into place.

"What's the medicine?" the coffin-maker asked Precious Auntie. She didn't answer.

"Traditional things," the bonesetter said. "A little opium, a few herbs, and a special kind of dragon bone we dig out from the Monkey's Jaw, a secret place only our family knows."

"Special dragon bone, eh?" Chang dipped his finger in the medicine bowl, then dabbed it inside his cheek. He offered some to Precious Auntie, who sniffed in disgust, and then he laughed and gave Precious Auntie a bold look, as if he owned her and could do whatever he pleased. In those days, a well-to-do husband was always looking for a second wife.

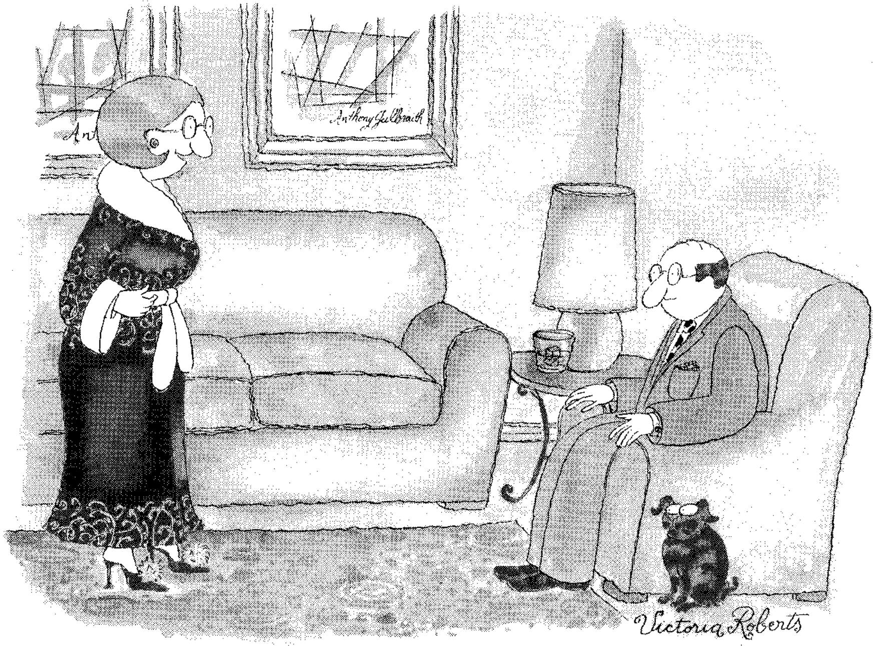
Right after the Changs and their baby left, Baby Uncle limped in. His name was Liu, he said, Liu Hu Sen. He had been on his way from his family's ink shop in Peking to their home in Immortal Heart, when his horse spooked, throwing him, so he decided, "Better take myself right to the Famous Bonesetter in the Mouth of the Mountain." Precious Auntie was in the back room and could see the young ink-maker through a parted curtain. He was a thin man in his early twenties. His face was refined, but he did not act pompous or overly formal, and, while his gown was not that of a rich gentleman, he was well groomed. She heard him joke with her father about his accident: "My mare was so crazy with fright I thought she was going to gallop straight to the underworld with me stuck astride."

When Precious Auntie stepped into the room, she said, "But fate brought you here instead." Baby Uncle fell quiet. When she smiled, he forgot his pain. When she put a dragon-bone poultice on his naked foot, he decided to marry her. That was Precious Auntie's version of how fast their love grew.

The next morning, Baby Uncle came back with three stemfuls of lychees for Precious Auntie, to show his gratitude. He peeled off the shell of one, and she ate the white-fleshed fruit in front of him. The morning was warm for late autumn, they both remarked. He asked if he could recite a poem he had written that morning. "You speak," he said, "the language of shooting stars, more surprising than sunrise, more brilliant than the sun, as brief as sunset. I want to follow your trail to eternity."

Later that week, unbeknownst to each other, both men went to fortune-tellers to find out if there were any bad omens for marriage.

Chang went to a fortune-teller in Immortal Heart, a man who walked about the village with a divining stick. The marriage signs were excellent for a second wife, this fortune-teller said. See here, Precious Auntie was born in a Rooster year, and Chang was a Snake—nearly the best match possible. The old man said that Precious Auntie also had a lucky number of strokes in her name. And as a bonus, she had a mole in position eleven, near the fatty part of her cheek, indicating that only sweet words



"I say 'fiesta,' you say 'siesta.'"

fell from her obedient mouth. Chang was so happy to hear this that he gave the fortune-teller a big tip.

Baby Uncle went to a fortune-teller in the Mouth of the Mountain, an old lady with a face more wrinkled than her palm. She saw nothing but calamity. The first sign was the mole on Precious Auntie's face. It was in position twelve, she told Baby Uncle, and it dragged the girl's mouth down, meaning that her life would always bring her sadness. What's more, she was a fire Rooster, and he a wood Horse, and the combination of birth years was inharmonious. The girl would ride his back and peck him apart piece by piece. The fortune-teller confided to Baby Uncle that she knew the girl quite well. She often saw her on market days, walking by herself; the girl did fast calculations in her head and argued with merchants. She was arrogant and headstrong, too educated. Better find another match, the fortune-teller said. This one will lead to disaster.

Baby Uncle gave the fortune-teller more money, to make her think harder. The fortune-teller kept shaking her head. But after Baby Uncle had given her a total of a thousand coppers, the old lady finally had another thought. When the girl smiled, which was often, her mole was in a luckier position, number eleven. The fortune-teller consulted an almanac, matched it to the hour of the girl's birth. Good news. The Hour of the Rabbit was peace-loving. Her inflexibility was just a bluff. And any leftover righteousness could be beaten down with a strong stick. "But don't marry in the Dragon Year. Bad year for a Horse."

The first marriage proposal came from Chang's matchmaker, who went to the bonesetter and related the good omens. The matchmaker boasted of the coffin-maker's standing, as an artisan descended from noted artisans. She described his house, his rock gardens, his fish ponds, the furniture in his many rooms, how the wood was of the best color, purple like a fresh bruise. As to the matter of a dowry, the coffin-maker was willing to be more than generous. Since the girl was to be a second wife and not a first, couldn't her dowry be a jar of opium and a jar of dragon bones? This was not much, yet it was priceless, and therefore not insulting to the girl.

The bonesetter considered the offer. He was growing old. Where would his daughter go when he died? What man would want her? She was too spirited, too set in her ways. She had no mother to teach her the manners of a wife. True, the coffin-maker was not the bonesetter's first choice for a son-in-law, but he did not want to stand in the way of his daughter's future happiness. So he told Precious Auntie about Chang's generous offer.

Precious Auntie huffed. "The man's a brute," she said. "I'd rather eat worms than be his wife."

The bonesetter had to give Chang's matchmaker an awkward answer. "I'm sorry," he said, "but my daughter cried herself sick, unable to bear the thought of leaving her worthless father." The lie would have been swallowed without disgrace, if only Baby Uncle's offer had not been accepted the following week.

A few days after the betrothal was announced, the coffin-maker went back to the Mouth of the Mountain and surprised Precious Auntie as she was returning from the well. "You think you can insult me, then walk away laughing?"

"Who insulted whom? You asked me to be your concubine, a servant to your wife. I'm not interested in being a slave in a feudal marriage."

As she tried to leave, Chang grabbed her by the neck, pinched it, saying he should break it, then shook her as if he truly might snap off her head like a winter twig. But instead he threw her to the ground, cursing her and her dead mother's private parts. And he said these words, which she never forgot: "You'll soon be sorry every day of your miserable life."

Precious Auntie did not tell her father or her beloved Baby Uncle what had happened. No sense in worrying them. And why lead her future husband to wonder if Chang had reason to feel insulted? Too many people had said she was too strong, accustomed to having her own way. And perhaps this was true.

A month before the wedding, Baby Uncle came to her room late at night. "I want to hear your voice in the dark," he whispered. "I want to hear the language of shooting stars." She let him into her *kang* and he eagerly began the nuptials. But as Baby Uncle caressed her, a wind blew over her skin and she began to tremble and shake. For the first time, she realized, she was afraid, frightened by unknown joy.

The wedding was supposed to take place in the Liu family compound in Immortal Heart. It was soon after the start of the New Year, a bare spring day. For the journey there from Mouth of the Mountain, Precious Auntie changed her clothes to her bridal costume—a red jacket and skirt, the fancy headdress with a scarf that she had to drape over her face once she left her father's home. For the journey, the bonesetter had procured only the best for his daughter: an enclosed sedan chair for the bride herself, four sedan carriers, two men with carts, a flute player, and two of the strongest bodyguards, with real pistols and gunpowder, to watch out for bandits. In one of the carts was the dowry—the jar of opium and the jar of dragon bones, the last of his supply. He assured his daughter many times that she need not worry about the cost. After her wedding, he could go to the Monkey's Jaw and gather more bones.

Halfway to Immortal Heart, two bandits wearing hoods sprang out of the bushes. "I'm the famous Mongol Bandit!" one of them bellowed. Right away, Precious Auntie recognized the voice of Chang the coffin-maker. What kind of ridiculous joke was this? But before she could say anything, the guards threw down their pistols, the carriers dropped their poles, and Precious Auntie was thrown to the floor of the sedan and knocked out.

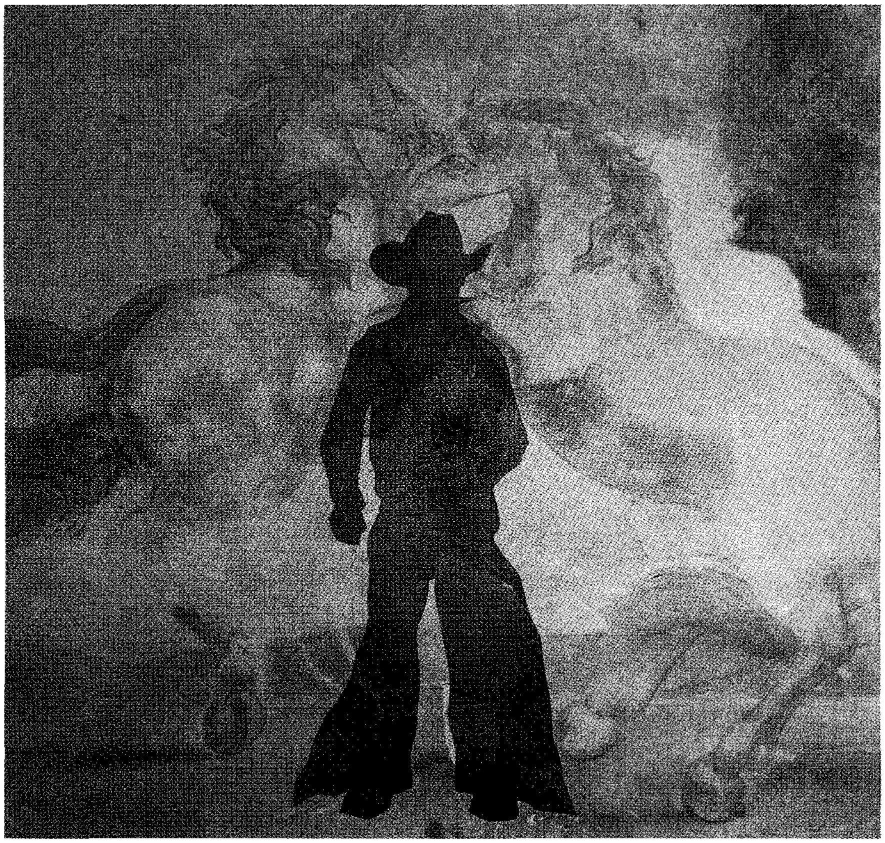
When she came to, Baby Uncle was lifting her out of the sedan. She looked around and saw that the wedding trunks had been ransacked and that the guards and carriers had fled. And then she noticed her father lying in a ditch, his head and neck at an odd angle, the life gone from his face. Was she in a dream? "My father," she moaned. As she bent over the body, unable to make sense of what had happened, Baby Uncle picked up a pistol that one of the guards had dropped.

"I swear I'll find the demons who caused my bride so much grief!" he

INFLUENCES BY ANNIE PROULX

BIG SKIES, EMPTY PLACES

For me, the strongest influences are the varied landscapes and bare ground of the hinterlands, rough weather and rural people living lives in the pincers of damaging isolation, ingrained localisms, and the economic decisions made by distant urban powers. The rush, for me, comes from the effort to put these lives on paper, and through them examine the society that draws the lines. A ruined house in the grasslands leaning away from the wind excites a profound sense of story in me, as does the morning sun flying up like a yellow parrot, or driving over face-powder caliche roads.



IRAIDA ICAZA

It is not pastoral nostalgia that shakes me but imagined histories built on such slender clues as a rusted tobacco can nailed to a lodgepole pine and containing a miner's claim from the last century, or an unchecked panhandle windmill boring a mad hole in the sky.

I am moved by the work of the sculptor Robert Smithson: the map he makes out of a heap of broken clear glass, or his vanishing points that do not vanish, or his mirrors "displaced" in the landscape. He once photographed rocks in situ, then removed the rocks and photographed the holes in the ground—absent presence. When people ask me why women are rarely the major protagonists in my stories and novels, I try to explain absent presence. I am interested in the rural world, and in that world it is men and men's work, whether logging or fishing or running cattle or growing soybeans, that dominate the culture and the history of the region. Yes, women do drive tractors, load steers, haul nets, run ranches, but more commonly theirs is an absent presence in rural events.

I am influenced by words and the chewiness of language, the specialized phrases and names that have come out of human work and travel through the landscapes—like "dry-ki," the deadwood on river sandbars. Old work words are falling into the pit of obsolescence as we abandon the labor of hands and bodies. The landscape historian John Stilgoe, in his "Shallow-Water Dictionary," mourns, and I with him, the loss of "estuary English, the marshland vocabulary" that contained such valuable words as "guzzle," "gundalow," "schoon," and "bore." I collect dictionaries of work and trades, of dialects and phrases. Some dictionaries have been bowdlerized by the compilers. Dictionaries of logging and maritime terms, which should be rich in graphic sexual imagery, are nearly always sanitized and prefaced by an ex-logger's or ex-sailor's wish not to offend any reader. I am offended by the deletions.

The outsider's eye is a writer's stock-in-trade, a persistent effort to grasp events through place and season, or through nuances of intonation, language rhythm, phraseology, or through regional physical characteristics, climate and weather, clothing and hair styles, café menus. A few years ago in Mud Butte, South Dakota, in the only eating place in town, there were three items on the handwritten menu—"hot beef, hot pork, hot hamb"—that said rather much about the place. The characters in a story, like people in life, behave as their landscape makes them behave—what they eat and wear, the work they do, the thoughts they think, and the way they spell "ham." When I write, I try to make landscapes rise from the page, to appear in the camera lens of the reader's mind. The reader is also an absent presence, but one that's leaning a sharp and influential elbow on my shoulder.

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shouted, and then he fired the pistol toward Heaven, startling his horse.

Precious Auntie did not see the kick that killed Baby Uncle, but she heard it—a terrible crack, like the opening of the earth. For the rest of her life she was to hear it in the breaking of twigs, the crackling of fire, whenever a melon was split in two.

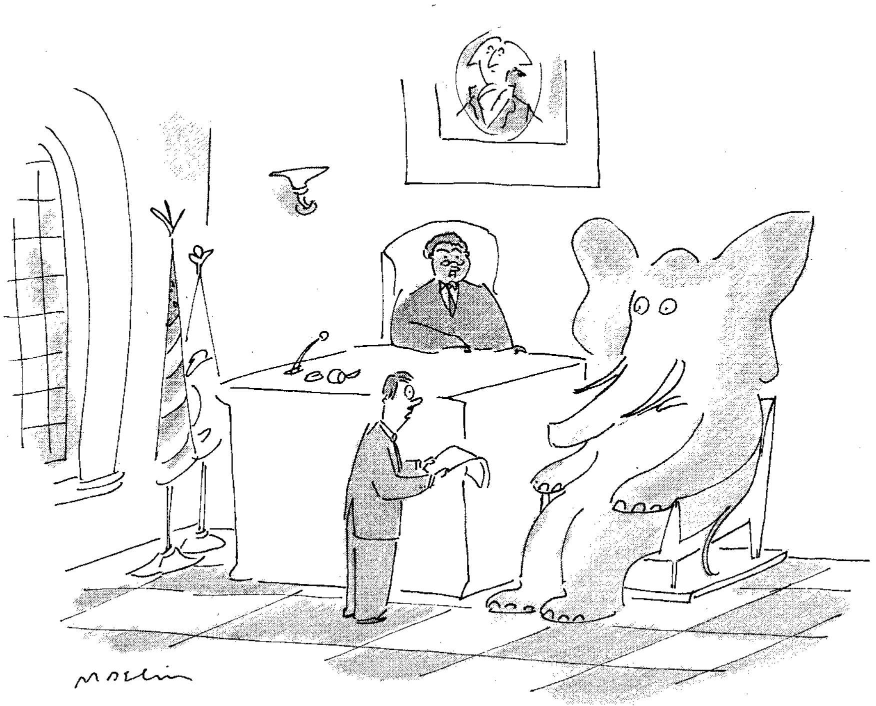
That was how Precious Auntie became a widow and an orphan on the same day. Baby Uncle's family took her into their home in Immortal Heart—how could they not?—until plans for a double funeral could be made. For three sleepless days, Precious Auntie apologized to the corpses of her father and Baby Uncle. She talked to their still faces. She touched their mouths, though this was forbidden.

On the third day, Chang arrived at the Liu family home with two coffins. "He killed them!" Precious Auntie cried when she caught sight of him. She picked up a fire poker and tried to strike him. She beat at the coffins. Baby Uncle's brothers had to wrestle her away. They apologized to Chang for the girl's lunacy, and Chang replied that grief of this magnitude was admirable. Because Precious Auntie continued to be wild with admirable grief, the women of the house had to bind her from elbows to knees with strips of cloth. Then they laid her on Baby Uncle's *kang*, where she wiggled and twisted like a butterfly stuck in its cocoon until Great Granny forced her to drink a bowl of medicine that made her body grow limp. For two days and nights she dreamed she was with Baby Uncle, lying on the *kang* as his bride.

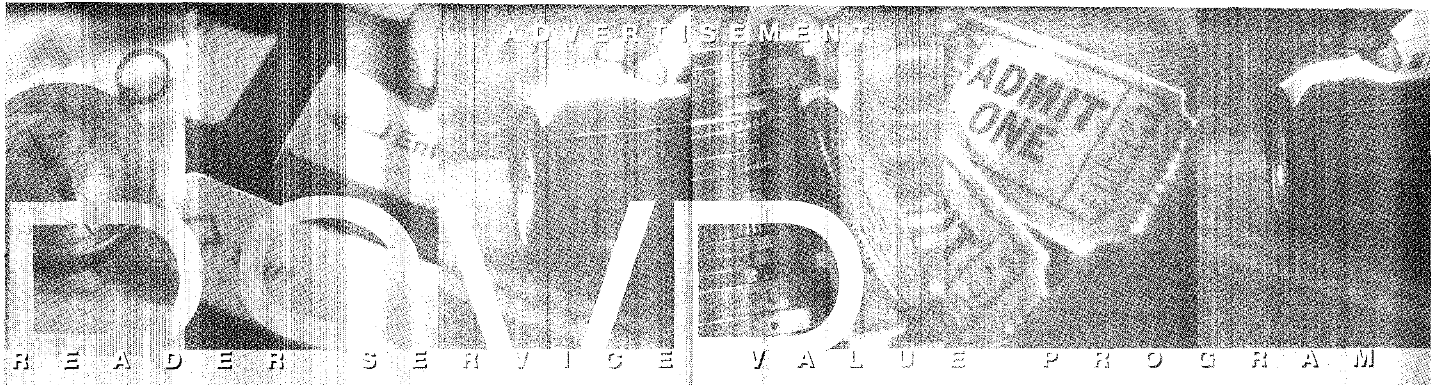
When she revived, she was alone in the dark. Her arms and legs had been unbound, but they were weak. The house was quiet. Weeping, she vowed to join her father and Baby Uncle in the yellow earth. In the ink-making studio, she went looking for a length of rope, a sharp knife, matches she could swallow, anything to cause pain greater than what she already felt. And then she saw a pot of black resin. She lowered a dipper into the liquid and put it in the maw of the stove. The oily ink became a soup of blue flames. She tipped the ladle and swallowed.

Great Granny was the first to hear the thump-bumping sounds, and she hurried to the studio with the other women of the household. They found Precious Auntie thrashing on the floor, hissing air out of a mouth blackened with blood and ink. "Like eels are swimming in the bowl of her mouth," Mother said. "Better if she dies."

But Great Granny did not let this



"So your testimony is that by the time you found Mr. Peanut he was already shelled. Is that correct?"



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happen. Baby Uncle's ghost had come to her in a dream and warned that if Precious Auntie died, he and his ghost bride would roam the house and seek revenge on those who had not pitied her. Day in and day out, Great Granny dipped cloths into ointments and laid these over Precious Auntie's burns. Over the next few months, the wounds changed from pus to scars. Precious Auntie had once been a fine-looking girl. Now all except blind beggars shuddered at the sight of her. But Great Granny continued to care for Precious Auntie: she bought dragon bones, crushed them, and sprinkled them into her swollen mouth. And eventually she noticed that another part of Precious Auntie had become swollen: her womb.

In the year 1929, my fourteenth year, I read Precious Auntie's story for the first time. Earlier that same year, the scientists, both Chinese and foreign, came to Dragon Bone Hill, at the Mouth of the Mountain. They wore sun hats and Wellington boots. They brought shovels and poking sticks, sorting pans and fizzing liquids. They dug in the quarries; they burrowed in the caves. They went from medicine shop to medicine shop, buying up all the old bones. Then some of the Chinese workers who dug for the scientists passed along a rumor that two of the dragon bones might have been teeth from a human head. Some people stopped buying dragon bones. Big signs in the medicine shops declared, "None of our remedies contain human parts."

At the time, Precious Auntie still had four or five dragon bones left from our visits to the cave at the Monkey's Jaw. Soon after this, her father, the Famous Bonesetter, came to her in a dream. "The bones you have are not from dragons," he said. "They are from our own clan, an ancestor who was crushed in the Monkey's Jaw. That's why nearly everyone in our family has died—your mother, your brother, myself, your future husband—because of this curse. Return the bones, or he'll continue to plague us."

The next morning, Precious Auntie rose early to return the dragon bones to the Monkey's Jaw. When she returned, she seemed more at ease. But then the workmen passed along this news: "The teeth are not only human but belong to a piece of skull from our oldest ancestors, one million years old!" Peking Man was what the scientists decided to call the section of skull. They needed to find just a few more pieces to make a whole skull, and a few more after that to connect his skull to his jaw, his jaw to his neck, his neck to his shoulders, and so on, until he was a complete man. That was why the scientists were asking the villagers to bring all the dragon bones they had lying around their houses and medicine shops. If the dragon bones proved to be from ancient humans, the owner would receive a reward.

I knew where there were human bones, and yet I could say nothing. I had to watch as others gouged the ground where their sheep chewed grass. From the muck, they yanked out roots and worms. They guessed that these might be ancient men's finger and toes, or even the fossilized tongue that spoke the first words of our ancestors. In a short while, our village looked worse than a burial ground dug up by grave robbers.

Day and night, the family talked of Peking Man and almost nothing else. "Million years?" Mother wondered aloud. "How can anyone know the age of someone who has been dead that long? *Hnh*, when my grandfather died, no one knew if he was sixty-eight or sixty-nine."

I, too, had something to say: "Why are they calling him Peking Man? The teeth came from the Mouth of the Mountain. And now the scientists are saying that skull was a woman's. So it should be called Woman from the Mouth of the Mountain." My aunts and uncles looked at me, and one of them said, "Wisdom from a child's lips, simple yet true." I was embarrassed to hear my words spoken of so highly. Then my sister Gao Ling added, "I think he should be called Immortal Heart Man. Then our town would be famous and so would we." Mother praised her suggestion to the skies, and the others joined in. To my mind, her idea made no sense, but I could not say this.

I was often jealous when Gao Ling received more attention from our mother. I was the elder daughter. I was smarter. I had done better in school. Yet Gao Ling had the honor of sitting next to Mother, of sleeping in her *kang*, while

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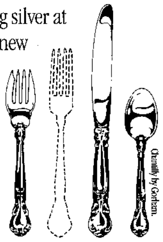

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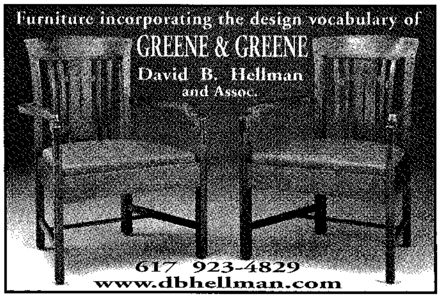

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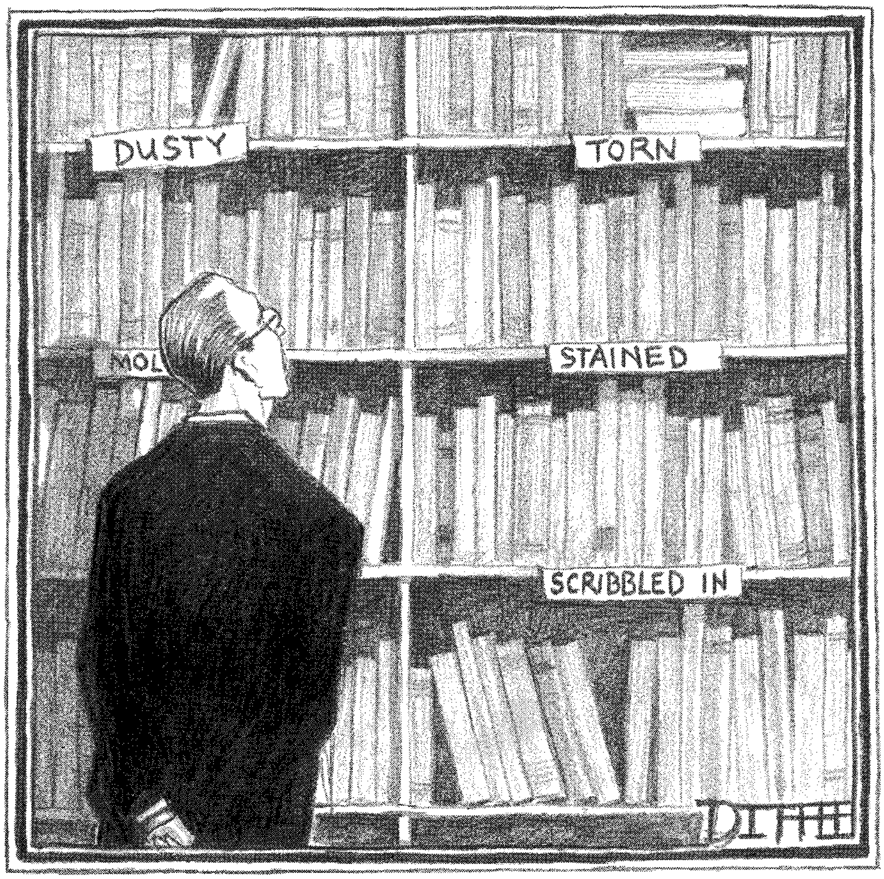

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I shared Precious Auntie's room and her *kang*.

When I was younger, that had not bothered me. I felt I was lucky to have my nursemaid by my side. I thought the words "Precious Auntie" were what others meant by "Ma." I could not bear to be separated from Precious Auntie for even one moment. I admired her and was proud that she could write the names of every flower, seed, and bush, as well as explain their medicinal uses. But the bigger I grew, the more she shrank in importance: Precious Auntie was only a servant, a woman who held no great position in our household, a person no one liked.

Often I complained to Precious Auntie that Mother did not love me. *Stop your nonsense*, Precious Auntie would answer. *Didn't you hear her today? She said your sewing was sloppy. And she mentioned your skin was getting too dark. If she didn't love you, why did she bother to criticize you for your own good?* And then Precious Auntie went on to say how selfish I was, always thinking about myself. She criticized me so much that, although I did not realize it then, I now know that she was saying she loved me even more.

One day—this was sometime before Spring Festival—Old Cook came back from the market and said big news was flying through Immortal Heart. We were working in the ink studio as usual, all the women and girls of our family, everyone except Precious Auntie, who was in the root cellar, counting the ink sticks she had already carved. Old Cook went on: Chang the coffin-maker had become famous and was soon to be very rich. Those dragon bones he had given to the scientists? The results had come back: they were human. How old was not certain yet, but everyone guessed they were at least a million years, maybe even two.

"What a peculiar coincidence," one of my aunts now said. "The same Mr. Chang who sells us wood. His luck could have been ours just as easily."

"Our association goes back even further than that," Mother boasted. "He was the man who stopped his cart to help after Baby Uncle was killed by the

Advertisement
(Open letter to Miriam W. seat 12C British Airways Flight 178, New York JFK to London Gatwick Nov. 11, 1999)

Dear Miriam,

This is an odd way to get in touch. When I first saw you sitting on the plane you were reading The New Yorker, so I'm trying this way to find you. I don't know much about you (other than your stories about Ohio). I did most of the talking, but I want you to know that our conversation changed my life.

Sometimes it's easier to talk to strangers and that flight was one of those times. I was in business, doing things I didn't enjoy. That morning I packed my suitcase, took the bumpy ride through the rain to the airport, feeling empty. On the flight I talked, you listened, and what you said gave me courage I never felt before.

I did it. I quit my job. I now live in Saigon in a house overlooking the river and have a business (www.mirmont.com) selling handmade things. Nice things, things that please me and that make people happy. It is going well and I owe you the drink I promised.

I would like to see you again. If you see this, please contact me.

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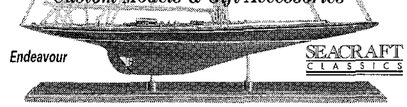
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Mongol bandits. A man of good deeds, that Mr. Chang."

Precious Auntie came back to the ink studio, and in a short while she realized who was being talked about. She stamped her feet and punched the air. *Chang is evil*, she said, her arms flailing. *He killed my father. He is the reason Baby Uncle is dead. And the bones, those are the ones he stole from my dowry, the bones of our ancestors who died in the Monkey's Jaw.*

That was not true, I thought. Her father had fallen off a cart when he was drunk, and Baby Uncle had been kicked by his own horse. Mother and my aunts had told me so. The Liu family had taken her in because they were too kindhearted for their own good.

I remember the day Mother received a surprise letter from Peking. It was the period of Great Heat, when mosquitoes were happiest. Great Granny had been dead for more than ninety days. We sat in the shade of the big tree in the courtyard, waiting to hear the news.

We all knew the letter writer, Old Widow Lau. She was a cousin, within eight degrees of kinship on Father's side and five degrees on Mother's side. She had come to Great Granny's funeral, and had wailed as loudly as the rest of us.

Since Mother could not read, she asked Gao Ling to, and I had to hide my disappointment. Gao Ling smoothed her hair, cleared her throat, and licked her lips. "Dear Cousin," she read, "I send greetings from all those who have asked after you with deep feeling." Gao Ling then stumbled through a long list of names, from those of brand-new babies to people Mother was sure were already dead. On the next page, our old cousin wrote something like this: "I know you are still in mourning and barely able to eat because of grief. So it is not a good time to invite everyone to come visit in Peking. But I have been thinking about what you and I discussed when we last saw each other, and I wish humbly to suggest that your number-one daughter"—she was speaking of me, and my heart swelled—"come to Peking and accidentally meet a distant relation of mine." Gao Ling threw me a scowl, and I was pleased that she was jealous. "This relation," Gao Ling continued, in a less enthusiastic voice, "has four sons who are seventh cousins of mine. They live in your same village, but are barely related to you, if at all."

When I heard the words "barely related," I knew this accidental meeting meant she wanted to see whether I might be a marriage match for a certain family. Most girls my age were already married. As to which family she was speaking of, Old Widow Lau did not want to say, unless she knew for certain that our family believed such a meeting could be beneficial. "To be honest," she wrote, "I would not have thought of this family on my own. But the father came to me and asked about Lu Ling. Apparently, they have seen the girl and are impressed with her beauty and sweet nature."

My face flushed. At last, Mother knew what others were saying about me. Perhaps she might finally see these good qualities in me.

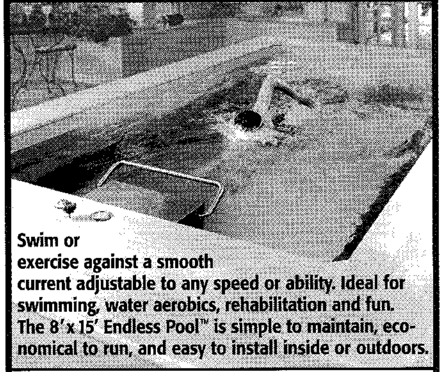
"I want to go to Peking, too," Gao Ling said like a complaining cat.

Mother scolded her: "Did anyone invite you? No? Shut your mouth, then." Mother yanked her braid before handing me the letter to finish reading.

I sat up straight, facing Mother, and read with much expression, "The family suggests a meeting at your ink shop in Peking." I stopped a moment and smiled at Gao Ling. I had never seen the shop, nor had she. "In this way," I continued, "if there is any disharmony of interest, there will be no public embarrassment for either family. If both families are in agreement about the match, then this will be a blessing from the gods, for which I can take no credit."

"No credit," Mother said with a snort, "just a lot of gifts."

The next part of the letter went like this: "My daughter-in-law suggested that your daughter's nursemaid should not accompany her to Peking. If a person were to see the two together, he would remember only the shocking ugliness of the nursemaid and not the emerging beauty of the maiden. I told her that was nonsense, and scolded her for being coldhearted. But as I write this letter, I realize now that it would be inconvenient to accommodate another servant, since mine already complain



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that there is not enough room to sleep in the bed they share. . . ."

Only when I was done reading did I look up at Precious Auntie, embarrassed. *Never mind,* she signed to me. *I'll tell her, later, that I can sleep on the floor.* I turned to Mother, waiting to hear what she had to say.

"Write back. Tell Old Widow Lau that I will have you go in a week. I'd take you myself, but it's our busiest season and we have too much to do. I'll ask Mr. Wei to take you in his cart. He always makes a medical delivery to Peking on the first and won't mind an extra passenger in exchange for a little cash."

Precious Auntie flapped her hands for my attention. *Now is the time to tell her you can't go alone. Who will make sure it's a good marriage? What if that busybody idiot cousin tries to barter you off as a second wife to a poor family? Ask her to consider that.* I shook my head. I was afraid to anger Mother with a lot of unnecessary questions and ruin my chance to visit Peking.

Later, Precious Auntie handed me a letter, which I was supposed to give to Gao Ling so she could read it to Mother. I nodded, and as soon as I was out of the room, I read it: "The summer air in Peking is full of diseases, and there are strange ailments we have never even experienced here, maladies that could make the tips of Lu Ling's nose and fingers fall off. Luckily, I know the remedies for such problems, so Lu Ling will not return bringing an epidemic with her. . . ." When Precious Auntie asked me if I had given Gao Ling the letter for Mother, I made my face and heart a stone wall. "Yes," I lied. Precious Auntie sighed, relieved. This was the first time she believed a lie of mine.

The night before I was to leave, Precious Auntie stood before me with the letter, which she had found in a pocket of my jacket. *What is the meaning of this?* She grabbed my arm.

"Leave me alone," I protested. "You can't tell me what to do anymore."

You think you're so smart? You're still a silly baby.

"I'm not. I don't need you now."

If you had a brain, then you wouldn't need me.

"You want to keep me here only so you won't lose your position as nursemaid."

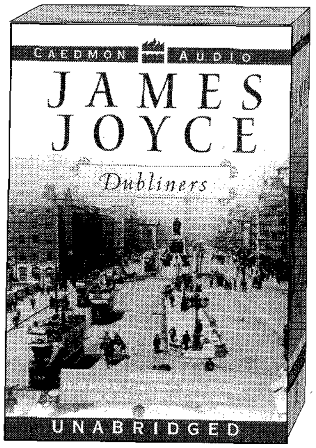
Her face turned dark, as if she were choking. *Position? You think I am here only for a lowly position as your nursemaid? Ai-ya! Why am I still alive to hear this child say such things?*

Our chests were heaving. And I shouted back what I had often heard Mother and my aunts say: "You're alive because our family was good and took pity on you and saved your life. We didn't have to. Baby Uncle never should have tried to marry you. It was bad luck. That's why he was killed by his own horse. Everyone knows it."

Her whole body slumped, and I thought she was acknowledging that I was right. At that moment, I pitied her in the same way I pitied beggars I could not look in the eye. I felt I had grown up

SPEAKING VOLUMES

Tempt your Senses



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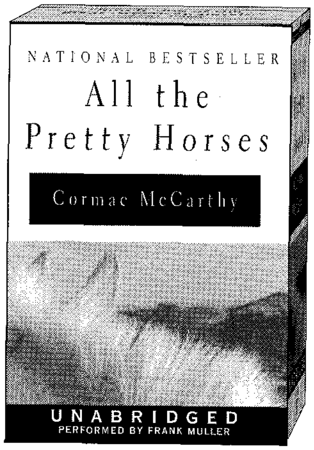

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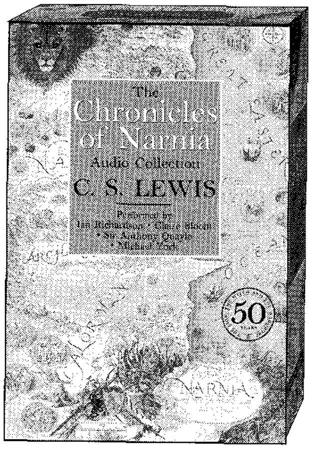

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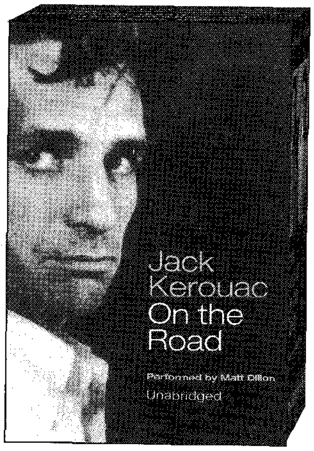

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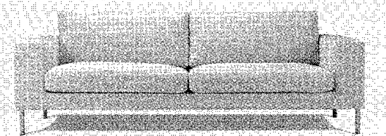

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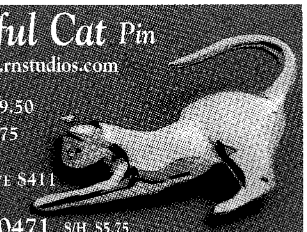

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at last, and she had lost her power over me. It was as if the old me were looking at the new me, admiring how much I had changed.

The next morning, Precious Auntie did not help me with my bundle of clothes. She did not prepare a lunch I could take along. Instead, she sat on the edge of the *kang*, refusing to look at me. Two hours before daybreak, Mr. Wei came by, his donkey loaded with cages of snakes for medicine shops. I tied on a scarf, to keep the sun off my face. As I climbed into the cart next to him, everyone except Precious Auntie was standing at the gate to see me off. Even Gao Ling was there, with her face unwashed. "Bring me back a doll," she shouted. At thirteen, she was still such a baby.

The day was a long ride of never-ending dust. Whenever the donkey stopped to drink water, Mr. Wei dipped a large rag into the stream and wrapped it around his head to keep himself cool. Soon I was doing the same with my scarf.

In the late afternoon, we approached Peking, and I instantly revived from the effects of the heat and my hunger. When we entered the inspection station, a policeman with a cap poked through my small bundle and looked inside the cages with Mr. Wei's snakes.

"What is your reason for being in Peking?" the policeman asked.

"Delivery of medicine." Mr. Wei nodded to the snake cages.

"Marriage," I answered truthfully, and the policeman turned to another and called out my answer and they both laughed. After that, they let us continue. Soon I saw a tall memorial archway in the distance, its gold letters glinting like the sun. We passed through and entered a roadway as wide as the greatest of rivers. Rickshaws raced by, more than I had seen in a lifetime. I saw men in loose-weave long jackets, others in Western suits. Those men looked more impatient, more important than the men in our village. And there were many girls in floating dresses, wearing hair styles like those of famous actresses, the fringe in front crimped like dried noodles. I heard a crisp crack, saw the freshly opened gut of a more delicious-looking melon than any we could buy in our town.

"If you gawk any more, your head will twist right off," Mr. Wei said. I kept tallying the sights in my head so I could tell everyone all that I had seen. I was imagining their awe, Mother's admiration, Gao Ling's envy. I could also see the disappointment in Precious Auntie's face. So I pushed her out of my mind.

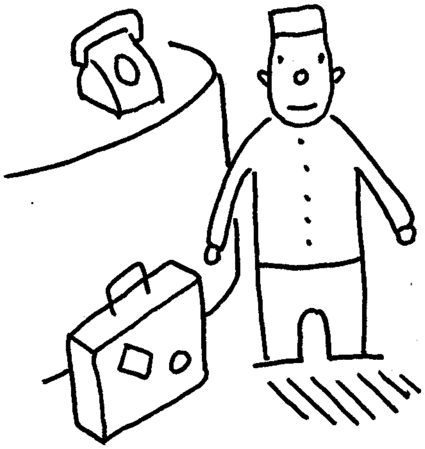
Finally we stood in front of the gate on Lantern Market Street that led into the cramped courtyard of Old Widow Lau's house. Two dogs ran toward me, barking.

"*Ai!* Are you a girl or a yellow-mud statue?" Old Widow Lau said in greeting. Dirt ringed my neck, my hands, every place where my body had a crease or a bend. I stood in a four-walled courtyard compound that was so chaotic that my arrival attracted almost no notice. Right away, Old Widow Lau handed me a beat-up bucket and told me where the well pump was. As I filled the bucket, I took a sip of the water, but it was brackish, terrible-tasting. No wonder Precious Auntie had told me that Peking was once the wasteland of the bitter sea. Just then, I realized this was the first time she had not been there to help me with my bath. Where was the tub? Where was the stove for warming the water? I was too scared to touch anything. I squatted behind a mat shed and poured cold water over my neck, angry with Precious Auntie for turning me into such a stupid girl.

When I next appeared before Old Widow Lau, she exclaimed, "Is your head just an empty eggshell? Why are you wearing a padded jacket and winter trousers? And what's the matter with your hair?"

How could I answer? That Precious Auntie had refused to help me prepare for the trip, and that I'd forgotten even a comb?

"What a disaster!" Old Widow Lau



muttered. "Pity the family that takes in this stupid girl for a daughter-in-law." She hurried to her trunks to search among the slim dresses of her youth. At last she settled on a dress borrowed from one of her daughters-in-law, a lightweight *qipao* that was not too old-fashioned. It had a high collar, short sleeves, and was woven in the colors of summer foliage, lilac for the body, and leafy green for the trim and frog clasps. Old Widow Lau then undid my messy braids and dragged a wet comb through my hair.

Lantern Market Street was not far from our family's ink shop, where the meeting with the interested family was to take place. I soon found myself standing in front of its door, anxious to see Father. Old Widow Lau was paying the rickshaw driver—or rather, arguing with him that he should not charge us so much for an extra passenger, since I was still a small child. "Small child?" the driver said with a snort. "Where are your eyes, old woman?" I stared at the hem of the lilac dress I had borrowed, patted the neatly knotted bun at the back of my head. I was embarrassed but also proud that the driver thought I was a grownup woman.

The ink shop faced north and was quite dim inside. Father was busy with a customer, and did not see us at first. Big Uncle welcomed us and invited us to be seated. From his formal tone, I knew he did not recognize me. So I called his name in a shy voice. And he squinted at me, then laughed and announced our arrival to Little Uncle, who apologized many times for not rushing over sooner to greet us. They urged us to be seated at one of two tea tables for customers. Little Uncle brought hot tea and sweet oranges.

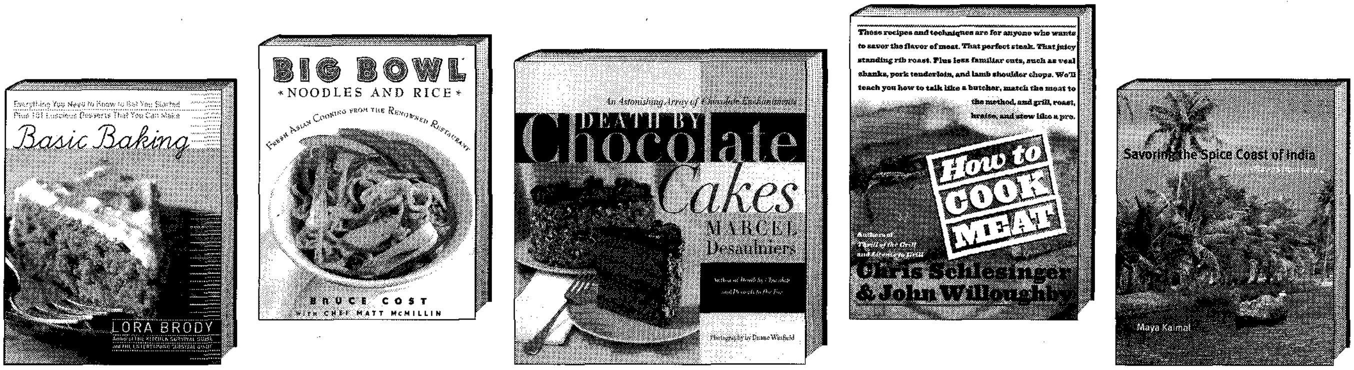
I tried to notice everything. Along the walls were display cases made of wood and glass, with silk-wrapped boxes inside. Father opened a box, took out an ink stick, set it on top of the glass case, and leaned over it with a customer. The stick had a top shaped like a fairy boat, and my father said, with graceful importance, "Your writing will flow as smoothly as a keel cutting through a glassy lake."

As he said this, Precious Auntie came back into my mind. I was remembering how she'd taught me that everything, even ink, had a purpose and a meaning. You cannot be an artist if your work comes without effort. That is the problem with modern bottled ink. You do not have to think. You simply write what is swimming on the top of your brain, which is nothing but pond scum, dead leaves, and mosquito spawn. But when you push an ink stick along an inkstone, you take the first step to cleansing your mind and your heart. You push and you ask yourself, What are my intentions? What is in my heart that matches my mind?

Just as Old Widow Lau had planned, my prospective mother-in-law accidentally passed by the shop promptly at the scheduled time. The woman was

MOUTH-WATERING

Tempt your Senses



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HOW TO LISTEN

I am going to cock my head tonight like a dog
in front of McGlinchey's tavern on Locust:
I am going to stand beside the man who works all day combing
his thatch of gray hair corkscrewed in every direction.
I am going to pay attention to our lives
unravelling between the forks of his fine-toothed comb.
For once, we won't talk about the end of the world
or Vietnam or his exquisite paper shoes.
For once, I am going to ignore the profanity and
the dancing and the jukebox so I can hear his head crackle
beneath the sky's stretch of faint stars.

—*Major Jackson*

younger than Mother. She had a stern countenance and she wore much gold and jade on her wrists, to show how valuable she was. When Old Widow Lau called to her, she acted puzzled at first, then delighted.

"What luck that we should run into you here," Old Widow Lau cried in a high voice. "When did you arrive in Peking?... Oh, visiting a cousin? How are things back in Immortal Heart?" After we had recovered from our fake surprise, Old Widow Lau introduced the woman to Father and my uncles. I was concentrating so hard on not showing any expression whatsoever that I did not hear her name.

"This is my cousin's Elder Daughter, Liu Lu Ling," Old Widow Lau said. "She is visiting Peking this week. The family lives in Immortal Heart village, like yours, but they sell their ink in Peking. And as you can see," she said, sweeping her hand out to indicate the shop, "their business is not doing too bad."

"In part, we have your husband to thank," Father then said. "We buy much of our excellent wood from him."

"Really?" Old Widow Lau and the woman said at once.

"Burns down to the best resin. And he has also supplied us with coffins on less fortunate occasions, always of the best quality," Father continued.

So this was the wife of Chang the coffin-maker. As more exclamations of surprise rang out, I realized that Precious Auntie would never allow me to marry into this family. Then I reminded myself that this was not her decision to make.

"We, too, are thinking of starting a business in Peking," Mrs. Chang said.

"Is that so? Perhaps we can help you in some way," Father said politely.

As Mrs. Chang paused to consider the excellence of this idea, Father added, "In any case, I've been eager to talk to your husband about the dragon bones he contributed to the great scientific discovery of Peking Man."

Mrs. Chang nodded. "We were astonished that those ugly little bones were so valuable. Lucky we didn't eat them up as medicine."

Two evenings later, we went to the Changs' cousin's house for a Viewing the Moon party. I wore another borrowed dress. I sat quietly and did not eat much and talked even less. Mr. Chang had come up from Immortal Heart, and he and Father discussed Peking Man.

"All the pieces of the skull must stay in China," Father said. "That is not only proper, it's the agreement with the foreigners."

"Those foreigners," Chang said, "you can't trust them to keep their word. They'll find a way to sneak out some pieces. They'll find excuses, make new treaties, apply pressure."

"No treaty can change the fact that Peking Man is a Chinese man and should stay where he lived and died."

Suddenly Mr. Chang turned toward me. "Maybe one day you and I can collect more bones of Peking Man to-

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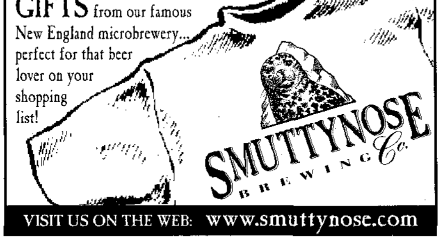
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gether. Then we can both be famous. How would you like that?"

I nodded eagerly.

The next day, I was a contented girl as I rode home. I had never felt so important. I had not shamed Old Widow Lau or my family. In fact, I had been a great success. My father had criticized me in small ways about unimportant matters. So I knew he was proud of me. Old Widow Lau had bragged to her daughters-in-law that I had the looks and manners to warrant ten proposals. She was certain I would receive an offer from the Changs within the week.

Though I had yet to meet the Changs' fourth son, who was back in Immortal Heart, I knew he was two years older than I was, and an apprentice in his father's coffin-making business. What's more, there had been talk of his expanding the business, just as our family had done, which meant I would live in Peking. During all these discussions, I did not ask if my future husband was smart, if he was educated, if he was kind. I did not think about romantic love. I knew nothing of that. But I did know that marriage had to do with whether I improved my station in life or made it worse. And, to judge by the Changs' manners and the jewelry the Chang wife wore, I was about to become a more important person. What could be wrong with that?

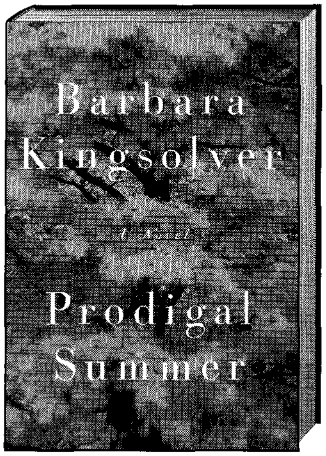
Mr. Wei came before dawn to take me back to Immortal Heart. On the way home, I began to dream about all the ways in which I had to change my life. I needed new clothes. And I should be more careful to keep my face out of the sun. I did not want to look like a dark little peasant girl. After all, we were artisans and merchants from an old clan, greatly respected.

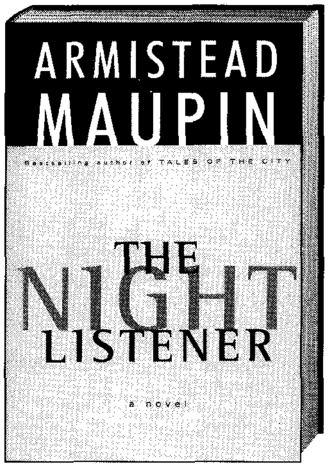
Hours later, the cart climbed the last hill that hid Immortal Heart. I could hear the crowing of cocks, the yowling of dogs, all the familiar sounds of our village. As quickly as it takes to snap a twig—that's how fast the mind can turn against what is familiar and dear. There I was, about to arrive at my old home, and I was not filled with sentimental fondness for all I had grown up with. Instead, I noticed the ripe stench of a pig pasture, the pockmarked land dug up by dragon-bone dream-seekers. I saw how the women we passed had the same bland face, with sleepy eyes that were mirrors of their sleepy minds. They were country people, both naïve and practical, slow to change but quick to think that a disturbance of ants on the ground was a sign of bad luck from the gods. Even Precious Auntie seemed, to my mind, a sleepy-headed greasy hat from the country.

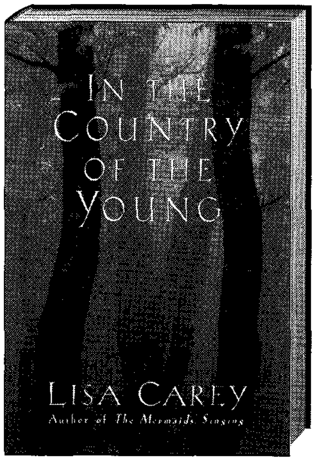
But as I pushed open the gate to our house my heart flew back into my chest, and I was filled with a longing to see Precious Auntie. I dashed into the front courtyard: "I'm home! I'm home already!" I went into the ink studio, where I saw Mother and Gao Ling. "Ah, back so soon?" Mother said, not bothering to stop her work. "Cousin Lau sent me a note that the meeting went well, and

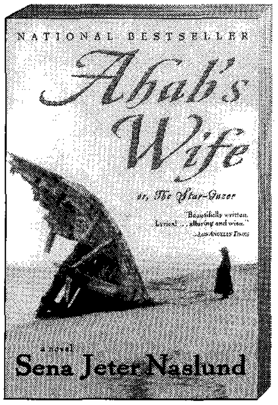
HEART-WARMING

Tempt your Senses









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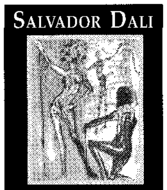

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the Changs will probably take you.” Gao Ling wrinkled her nose and said, “*Cho!* You smell like the hind end of a donkey.”

I went to the room I shared with Precious Auntie. Everything was in its usual place, the quilt folded just so at the bottom of the *kang*. But Precious Auntie was not there. I wandered from room to room, from little courtyard to little courtyard. With each passing moment, I felt more anxious to see her.

And then I heard a pot banging. She was in the root cellar, eager that I should know she was there. I peered down the steep ladder and into the tunnel. She waved, and as she climbed up from the shadows, I saw that she still had the figure of a girl. In the brief moment of seeing only half her face lit by the sun, she was again as beautiful as she had seemed to me when I was a small child. When she emerged from the hole, she put the pot down and stroked my face, then said with her hands, *Have you really come back to me?* She pulled my tangled braid and snorted. *Didn’t take your comb? No one to remind you?* With spit on her finger, she rubbed dirt from my cheek.

I pulled away. “I can clean myself,” I said.

She began to make hissing sounds. *Gone one week and now you’re so grownup?*

I snapped back: “Of course. After all. I’m about to be a married woman.”

I heard. And not as a concubine but as a wife. That’s good. I raised you well, and everyone can see that.

I knew then that Mother had not told her the name of the family. She had to hear it sooner or later. “The family is the Changs,” I said.

She made a choking sound, as if she were drowning. She rocked her head like a clanging bell. And then she told me with slashing hands, *You cannot. I forbid you.*

“It’s not for you to decide!” I shouted back.

She slapped me, then pushed me against the wall. I pushed her back and stood tall, draining all expression out of my face, and this surprised her. We stared at each other, breathing hard and fast, until we no longer recognized each other. She dropped onto her knees, pounding her chest over and over, her sign for *useless.*

“I need to go help Mother and Gao Ling,” I said, then turned from her and walked away.

Just as expected, the Changs asked our family if I could join theirs as a daughter-in-law. Mother decided that a few weeks would give her and my aunts enough time to sew quilts and clothes suitable for my new life. After Mother announced this news, she cried for joy. “I’ve done well by you,” she said proudly. “No one can complain.” Gao Ling cried as well. And though I shed some tears, not all of them were for joy. I would leave my family, my home. I would change from a girl to a wife. And no matter how happy I was sure to be, I would still be sad to say goodbye to my old self.

Precious Auntie and I continued to share the same room, the same bed. But she no longer drew my bath or brought me sweet water from the well. She did not help me with my hair or worry over my daily health and the cleanliness of my fingernails. We slept at the farthest ends of the *kang*. And if I found myself huddled next to her familiar form, I quietly moved away before she awoke. Every morning she had red eyes, so I knew she had been crying. Sometimes my eyes were red, too.

A few days before I was supposed to leave to join the Changs, I awoke to find Precious Auntie sitting up, staring at me. She raised her hands and began to talk. *Now I will show you the truth.* She went to the small wooden cupboard and removed a package wrapped in blue cloth. She put this in my lap. Inside was a thick wad of pages, threaded together with string. She stared at me with an odd expression, then left the room.

I looked at the first page. “I was born the daughter of the Famous Bonesetter from the Mouth of the Mountain,” it began. I glanced through the next few pages. And then I saw where it said, “Now I will tell you how bad this man Chang really is.” I threw the pages down. I did not want Precious Auntie poisoning my mind anymore. So I did not read to the end; I did not get to the part where she said she was my mother.

During our evening meal, Precious Auntie acted as if I were once again helpless. She pinched pieces of food with her chopsticks and added these to my bowl. *Eat more*, she ordered. *Why aren’t* *you eating? Are you ill? You seem warm. Your forehead is hot. Why are you so pale?*

After dinner, we all drifted to the courtyard as usual. Mother and my aunts were embroidering my bridal clothes. Precious Auntie was repairing a hole in my old trousers. She put down the needle and tugged my sleeve. *Did you already read what I wrote?*

I nodded, not wishing to argue in front of the others. My cousins, Gao Ling, and I played weaving games with strings looped around our fingers, and the evening wore on. All too soon it was time for bed. I waited for Precious Auntie to go first. After a long while, when I thought she might already be asleep, I went into the dark room.

Immediately Precious Auntie sat up and was talking to me with her hands.

"I can't see what you're saying," I said. And when she went to light the kerosene lamp, I protested, "Don't bother, I'm sleepy. I don't want to talk right now." She lit the lamp anyway. I went to the *kang* and lay down. She followed me and set the lamp on the ledge, crouched, and stared at me with a glowing face. *Now that you have read my story, what do you feel toward me? Be honest.*

I grunted. And that little grunt was enough for her to clasp her hands, then bow and praise the Goddess of Mercy for saving me from the Changs. Before she could give too many thanks, I added, "I'm still going."

For a long time, she did not move. Then she began to cry and beat her chest. Her hands moved fast: *Don't you have feelings for who I am?*

And I remember exactly what I said to her: "Even if the whole Chang family were murderers and thieves, I would join them just to get away from you."

She slapped her palms against the wall. And then she finally blew out the lamp and left the room.

In the morning, she was gone. But I was not worried. A few times in the past when she had become angry with me she had left like this, but she'd always come back. Let her be angry, then, I said to myself. She doesn't care about my future happiness. Only Mother does. That is the difference between a nursemaid and a mother.

These were my very thoughts as my aunts, Gao Ling, and I followed Mother to the ink-making studio to begin our work. As we entered the dim room, we saw a mess. There were stains on the walls. Stains on the bench. Long spills along the floor. Had a wild animal broken in? And what was that rotten, sweet smell? Then Mother began to wail. "She's dead! She's dead!" In the next moment, I saw Precious Auntie, the top half of her face limestone white, her eyes wild and staring at me. She was sitting propped up against the far wall.

"Who's dead?" I called to Precious Auntie. "What happened?" I walked toward her. Her hair was unbound and matted, and then I saw that her neck was clotted with flies. Her eyes followed me as I moved toward her, but her hands

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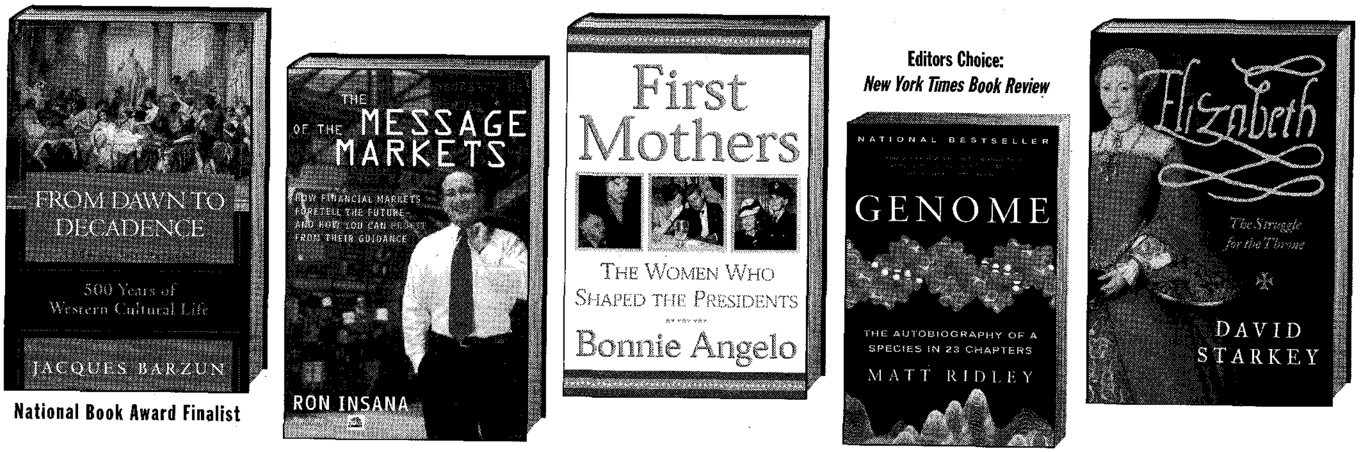

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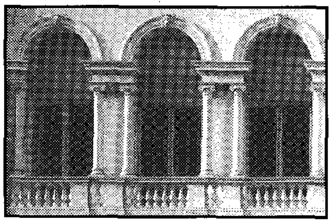

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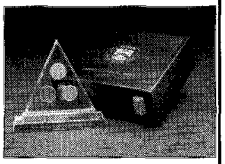

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did not move. One held a knife that was used to carve ink sticks. Before I could reach her, a cousin pushed me aside so she could better gawk.

Of that day, this is all I remember. I didn't know how I came to be in my room, lying on the *kang*. When I woke up again, it was morning and Gao Ling was sitting on the edge of my *kang*. "No matter what," she said with a tearful face, "I promise to always treat you like a sister." Then she told me what had happened.

The day before, Mrs. Chang had come over. She was clutching a letter from Precious Auntie. It had arrived in the middle of the night. "What is the meaning of this?" the Chang woman wanted to know. The letter said that if I joined the Chang household, Precious Auntie would come to stay as a live-in ghost, haunting them forever. "Where is the woman who sent this?" Mrs. Chang demanded. And when Mother told her that the nursemaid who'd written it had just killed herself, Mrs. Chang was terrified. She left scared out of her wits.

After that, Mother rushed over to the body, Gao Ling said. Precious Auntie was still propped up against the wall. "This is how you repay me?" Mother cried. "I treated you like a sister. I treated your daughter like my own." And she kicked the body, again and again, for not saying *thank you, sorry, I beg your pardon a thousand times*. "Mother was crazy with anger," Gao Ling said. "She told Precious Auntie's body, 'If you haunt us, I'll sell Lu Ling as a whore.' " After that, Mother ordered Old Cook to put the body in a pushcart and throw it over the cliff. "She's down there," Gao Ling said. "Your Precious Auntie is lying in the End of the World."

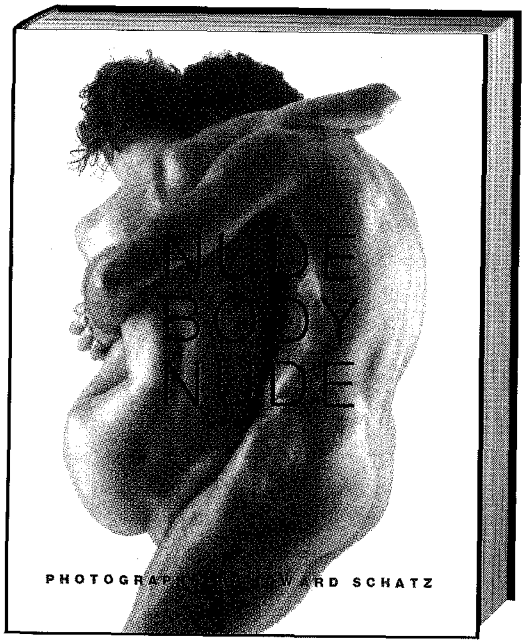
When Gao Ling left, I still did not understand everything she had said, and yet I knew. I found the pages Precious Auntie had written for me. I finished reading them. At last, I read her words. *Your mother, your mother, I am your mother.*

That day, I went to the End of the World to look for her. As I slid down, branches and thorns tore at my skin. When I reached the bottom, I was feverish to find her. I heard the drumming of cicadas, the beating of vulture wings. I walked toward the thick brush, to where trees grew sideways just as they had fallen with the crumbling cliff. I saw moss, or was that her hair? I saw a nest high in the branches, or was that her body stuck on a limb? I came to a wasteland with rocky mounds, ten thousand pieces of her skull and bones. Everywhere I looked, it was as if I were seeing her, torn and smashed. I had done this. I was remembering the curse of her family, my family, the dragon bones that had not been returned to their burial place. Chang, that terrible man, wanted me to marry his son only so I would tell him where to find more of the dragon bones. How could I be so stupid as not to have realized this before?

I searched for her until dusk. By then, my eyes were swollen with dust and tears. I never found her. And as I climbed back up, I was a girl who had lost part of herself in the End of the World.

For five days I could not move. I could not eat. I could not cry. I lay in the lonely *kang* and felt the air leaving my chest. When I thought I had nothing left, my body still continued to be sucked empty. On the sixth day, I began to cry and did not stop, from morning until night. When I had no more feeling, I rose from my bed and went back to my life. I thought about what Precious Auntie had written, what she must have been thinking as she pushed the ink stick along the inkstone. She was taking the first step to clearing her mind and her heart. She pushed and pushed, asking herself, "What are my intentions? What is in my heart that will trickle into my daughter's foolish mind?"

I am your mother, she wrote. I read these words after she died. Yet I have a memory of her telling me with her hands. I can see her telling me with her eyes. When it is dark, she says this to me in a clear voice I have never heard. She speaks in the language of shooting stars. ♦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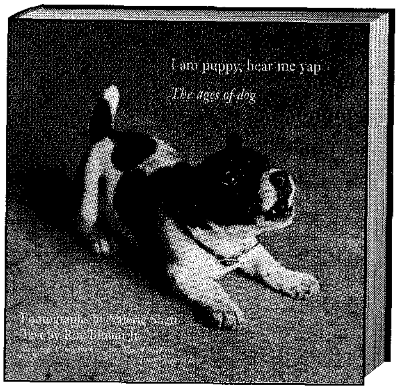
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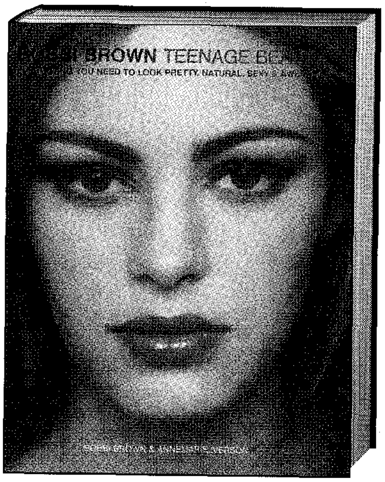
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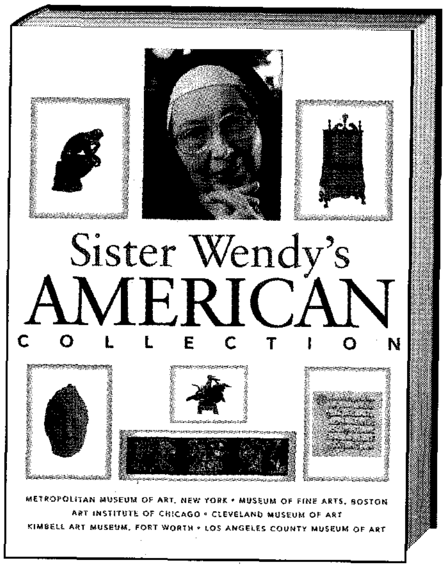
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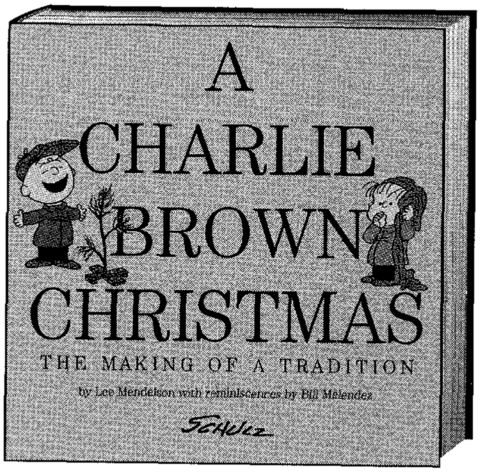
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FAST TRACK

Movies for the holidays.

BY DAVID DENBY

At the beginning of Steven Soderbergh's "Traffic"—the most exciting and complexly imagined American movie of the year—two members of the Mexican state police wait in a car in the middle of the bright-yellow desert outside Tijuana. A mysterious airplane lands near the men, Javier (Benicio Del Toro) and Manolo (Jacob Vargas), and soon a truck drives away from the landing area. The policemen pull the truck over, demand a bribe from the passengers, then wait for them to reach for their wallets. At that point, the cops draw their guns and arrest them in what seems like a straightforward bust—the truck is full of cocaine. But a few minutes afterward Javier and Manolo themselves are pulled over by uniformed soldiers, who ride away with the dope and the captured smugglers and leave the two policemen sitting in the bleached wasteland. The leader of the soldiers, General Salazar (Tomas Milian), later makes Javier and Manolo part of his squad, which, he says, is dedicated to eliminating the drug cartel in Tijuana. But is Salazar a legitimate crime fighter? Cynical and vicious, he uses torture to get the information he wants. And are Javier and Manolo honest? Mysteries, double meanings, and sly, mocking falsehoods fill every scene of this movie. In the desert sequence, the editing, which relies on jump cuts, restlessly pushes us farther along in the action, and we struggle to hold on to implications that we can't immediately sort out. The mood is rushed, dazed, fraught with suspicion. "Traffic" offers an astoundingly vivid and wide-spanning view of the drug war—high and low, dealer and user, Mexican and American—and the ambiguity of its many encounters is a good part of its meaning. In the drug world, no one is quite what he seems: greed and hunger change human character as acid changes virgin soil. With intelligence and grim good humor, the movie threads its way through lies, put-ons, and betrayals; at the end, it settles at an uneasy point somewhere between resignation and hope.

Soderbergh shot "Traffic" himself, with the camera on his shoulder, and he throws us right into the middle of the action; the imagery is ragged and bursting, as if the director of "Erin Brockovich" wanted to squeeze more life into a frame than he ever has before. Yet there's nothing incoherent or half-baked about "Traffic"; a great deal of planning has fuelled its free-spinning energy. Some years ago, the producer Laura Bickford, a friend of Soderbergh's, optioned the right to remake a British TV miniseries from the eighties called "Traffik," in which multiple story lines tracked drug dealers from Pakistan to Great Britain. At the same time, the screenwriter Stephen Gaghan ("Rules of Engagement") was at work on a drug-trafficking story with the producers Edward Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz. The two teams joined forces, and centered the action on the Mexican-American border, with its melancholy lines of cars and its sniffing dogs—as essential a spiritual and geographical station in the drug wars as Checkpoint Charlie was in the Cold War.

Gaghan's script sets up three stories in parallel, and Soderbergh gives each its own physical look and style of movement. The Tijuana scenes are tinted a near-ugly pale brown, as if the film had been dipped in tobacco juice. Benicio Del Toro's policeman, muttering in Spanish, moves through squalid shadows with the confidence of a chameleon who knows he can always hide, or at least lurk. Del Toro has a shambling, easy way with his body and his smile—with a single angel-faced grin he picks up a gay assassin in a bar. (In the next scene, the guy is riding blindfolded to General Salazar's headquarters.) By contrast, Michael Douglas, as the federal judge Robert Wakefield, is all clenched rectitude; Douglas's jaw, jowls, and neck do Olympic-class work in holding his face in a tense, hostile mask. A conservative from Ohio, Wakefield is appointed to the thankless job of drug czar by the President. At home, in his suburban mansion in Cincinnati, or on official visits to Washington, he is photographed with blue filters, and as he unhappily takes over his job he looks like a creature trapped in a fish tank—entirely exposed.

Wakefield travels to the Mexican border and receives information from real-life drug officials (some senators and journalists show up as well, at a Washington party). He's a little naïve, but at least he's trying to learn things from the ground up. Wakefield learns more than he wants; his beautiful and intelligent sixteen-year-old daughter, Caroline (Erika Christensen), hangs out with prep-school friends who freebase cocaine. She becomes addicted and falls all the way to the bottom—to the tenderloin streets and filthy hotels of Cincinnati, from which Wakefield, like a visitor in hell, tries to rescue her. Young Erika Christensen appears to be a remarkable actress. When she inhales some cocaine, her lips part as if she were receiving a revelation, and she falls back in a near-swoon and lets the man who's feeding her the drug make love to her. Christensen's skin glows, and the baby fat, still there, turns plush and pillowy. These scenes make us seriously uncomfortable: Soderbergh won't deny that for a teen-ager drugs can be blissful and even, for a moment, liberating; for Caroline, the drugs and sex together

MARISCAL

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MARISCAL

become a mortally dangerous pleasure.

Stephen Gaghan captures the self-deluding chatter of suburban rich kids with almost satiric brilliance. In the third story, he goes after the starchy lies of the desperate drug-entrepreneur nouveaux riches of San Diego, where a woman sitting on a fortune (Catherine Zeta-Jones) tries to keep up a front when her kingpin-dealer husband (Steven Bauer) faces trial. Her adversaries are a couple of irresistibly witty and resourceful cops (Don Cheadle and Luis Guzmán) doing the tawdry, dull work of stakeouts. People from different stories start bumping into one another, but, apart from these meetings, the material is held together by the twin motives of greed and honor. Soderbergh asks, How can you wage a war on drugs when drugs answer every weakness of our culture, when we are constantly fighting against our own families and ourselves? We are born into this infernal war and we will die out of it. "Traffic" offers as an antidote to despair nothing but the efforts of a few noble soldiers, who will go on fighting on both sides of the border, day after day, arrest after arrest, forever and ever.

In "What Women Want," Mel Gibson plays an out-of-date macho peacock—a jerk—and he tries much too hard to be funny. I've never seen Gibson do so many double takes, or stutter and fumble so much. His performance is overdetailed, even fussy, and he slows down comic ideas that should fly straight to the target. "What Women Want" has a premise that should have been devastating: Gibson, sizzled in the bathtub by an electric hair dryer, develops the power to hear what women are thinking, a sixth sense that gives him an enormous advantage at work and in the sack. But the director, Nancy Meyers, a former screenwriter, repeats and underlines everything, as if the joke of Gibson's hearing candid thoughts were so daringly sophisticated that we wouldn't get it unless we were poked in the ribs over and over. Meyers started well, in 1980, with the script for "Private Benjamin," but in "Baby Boom" and the "Father of the Bride" movies she seemed to be setting up shop in a mall, fielding pretested products for a sluggish audience. The Meyers method now is to work from stereotypes of the sexes, ruffle the clichés a bit, and then congratulate herself and the audience for overturning what few people believed in the first place. "What Women Want" has some great moments, but Gibson and Helen Hunt, who plays his new boss in a high-powered advertising agency, don't really click. Gibson's way with romance is to be goofy and frisky and to throw as many curves as he can, and Hunt's is to be honest and straight and to weigh whatever strange things she hears against her common sense. A chimpanzee and a leopard, they're on different limbs of the tree. "What Women Want" is marred by slickly fatuous self-confidence. If Nancy Meyers could suddenly hear what the audience is thinking, she might be in for a surprise or two. ♦

GILDING LILY

BY ANTHONY LANE

When the British director Terence Davies offered the leading role in "The House of Mirth" to Gillian Anderson, it was because he had seen her in still photographs; her features, apparently, reminded him of John Singer Sargent paintings, and you can see why. It was not because of Anderson's part in "The X-Files" on TV; indeed, Davies had never seen "The X-Files," and I suspect that Anderson took the job precisely in order to slip the shackles of television fame and move on from the exploits of Agent Scully. If so, her success was only partial; as Lily Bart, she is fine and fulsome throughout "The House of Mirth," but, if she really thought that Scully—a young woman fighting to maintain her self-possession in the face of inexplicable behavior and alien oppressors—had nothing in common with the world of Edith Wharton, she was much mistaken.

Lily's story is simply told. In the first years of the century, she refuses to do the done thing and take a husband; she views marriage as, if not the craven thing, then at least the thing so obvious as to be worth resisting. She moves in decent society, with all its attendant indecencies, but she has little money of her own—merely an allowance from her terrifying aunt (Eleanor Bron).There are those—the jowly Gus Trenor (Dan Aykroyd), say, or Bertha Dorset (Laura Linney), an ethereal bitch—who are only too happy to taunt or take advantage of Lily for her stubbornness, and she is smoothly ruined; she dies in a rented room, mourned only by her friend Lawrence Selden (Eric Stoltz). In the film, he kneels against her deathbed, sobbing, while the screen fades to pale: a strange, late-Victorian ending for so merciless a vision of the new century.

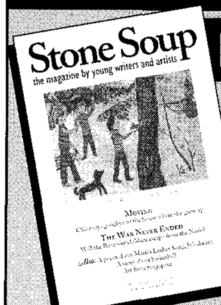
Our heroine's downward path, although well trampled in literature, is dangerously straightforward for the purposes of cinema; viewers who don't know Wharton's novel will be waiting for entanglements that never come, or for the joys of a final upswing. Equally, if you miss the explanatory credit at the start—"New York 1905"—you may sit there wondering, What country, friends, is this? The story may be set in New York, or in reachable rural estates, but it was shot in Glasgow and in solid Scottish manses. It is a brave performance by Scotland, but not a wholly convincing one; apart from what sounded like a pasted-on soundtrack of native squawks and chirrups in the woodland shots, not for a second did I believe that these people were strolling through America. The texture of the stone looks wrong, even the echoes in the vaulted buildings ring wrong; yet, oddly enough, the errors don't kill the picture. The moral of the tale—that men and women alike can be punished by the rich for being poor—is so venomous, and so timely, that Davies is able to extract its full value through visual distillation. He may not have had the money, or the logistical resources, to do what Scorsese did with "The Age of Innocence" and provide a fully furnished portrait of an era, but he deals beautifully in the brief glance and the fast-burning scene, with the best sequences lasting no longer than a pas de deux. "We resist the great temptations, but it is the little ones that eventually pull us down," Lily says. True, and it is the little details that build you up: the way you hold your knife, the way you sip your tea. The bad news is, they *can* take that away from you.

Wharton makes a point of referring to Lily's breathing technique, as if to sketch the choking environment in which she swims: "There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears." Any actress would pounce on that, and Anderson's heaving bosom displays a close acquaintance with the text; at the same time, she has the courage to pull away from the page, from the slightly Austen-ish blend of dupe and minx which Wharton proposed, and to modernize Lily into something prouder, less easily preyed upon. With her hair piled up, and her chin thrust out, and her need for a cigarette as randy as that of Bette Davis in "Now, Voyager" (Anderson has Davis's dreamily determined eyes, too), this Lily, for all her protestations of imprudence, seems quite prepared to stare tragedy in the face. "You're such a wonderful spectacle," Eric Stoltz says, and when the two of them kiss, the clash of redhead-on-redhead seems more than likely to trigger an electrical storm. I was bored by Davies's much-praised autobiographical movies, such as "Distant Voices, Still Lives," but in turning outward from his own past he appears to have found both passion and relief; if he remains more at home with interiors, with accents of bronze and velvet and glass-fronted cabinets, than with rolling landscapes, that only proves his credentials for the filming of Edith Wharton. Her creations are too creepy for anything but the great indoors and its heavy varnish of euphemism: "I just want to be *thanked* a little," Gus Trenor says with a leer, as he claims a debt from Lily. We all know what that means.

There's no getting away from the fact that "The House of Mirth," despite its skill, is a rum choice of release for the coming holidays; snobs and Scrooges will wolf it down, but more balanced citizens may find it too lugubrious an antidote to Christmas cheer. For a lighter option, they could try "O Brother, Where Art Thou?," the latest offering from those cheeky Coen brothers. This time, the setting is a Southern dust bowl, with a trio of convicts—played by George Clooney, John Turturro, and Tim Blake Nelson—fleeing their chain gang and seeking a way home while taking time out to enjoy a spree of implausibilities en route. "Based on the Odyssey," the opening credits say, though that is no more than a nudge wrapped in a tease; various escapades bear a faint Homeric coloring—the eye patch on John Goodman's Bible-thumper, more thump than Bible, is a neat wink at the Cyclops—but viewers whose ancient Greek has rusted over need not fret.

At the close of a gruesome year for moviegoing, the film deserves a friendly greeting, and I would happily join the party were it not for a queasy suspicion that "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" is less of a movie and more of an excuse for a really great soundtrack. No one can deny the Coens' nose for the quirks of fate, but quirkiness works best when the fate is formalized—when there are mysteries to be solved, as in "Blood Simple" and "Fargo." Without that framework, the japes can slacken and tire, and even the best running gags eventually lose their legs; the hair gel that is required by the preening Clooney, for example, may be funny at the beginning, but by the end it's just grease. Clooney will do himself no harm with this project, which should certify his reputation as a good sport, yet it is bulky old stagers like Charles Durning, playing a campaigning governor with a white suit and a stained soul, who do most to anchor the whimsy; Goodman, meanwhile, is the best thing in sight, his jovial menace rippling out as effectively as it did through "Barton Fink."

Worshippers of Preston Sturges will recognize the title of this film; "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" was the name of the well-meaning, socially constructive work that was planned by the Joel McCrea character—a movie director saddled with a conscience—in "Sullivan's Travels." By the end, he thought better of it, realizing that what Americans needed to see them through the Depression was Mickey Mouse—or, better still, a Preston Sturges comedy. The Coens have taken that lesson to heart, but they can hardly hope to equal the patching of light and dark in Sturges's masterpiece, and some of the walk-on roles, notably the black figures, are treading the verge of parody; you feel that the Coens are holding up specimens of their own invention, as if with a pair of tweezers, and saying proudly, "Look! Amusing people! Freaky situations, too!" Still, it's hard to dislike any motion picture that features the leading heartthrob of the age—and Clooney would have throbbed in any age, not least that of Sturges himself—wearing a false beard the size of a sheepskin and yowling the song "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow" to a crowd of rapturous rednecks. So what next for the Coens? I was about to suggest a new version of the Trojan War, set in Palm Beach, but reports from the area indicate that this has already taken place. ◆



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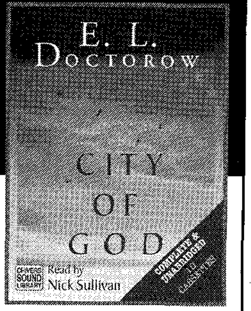

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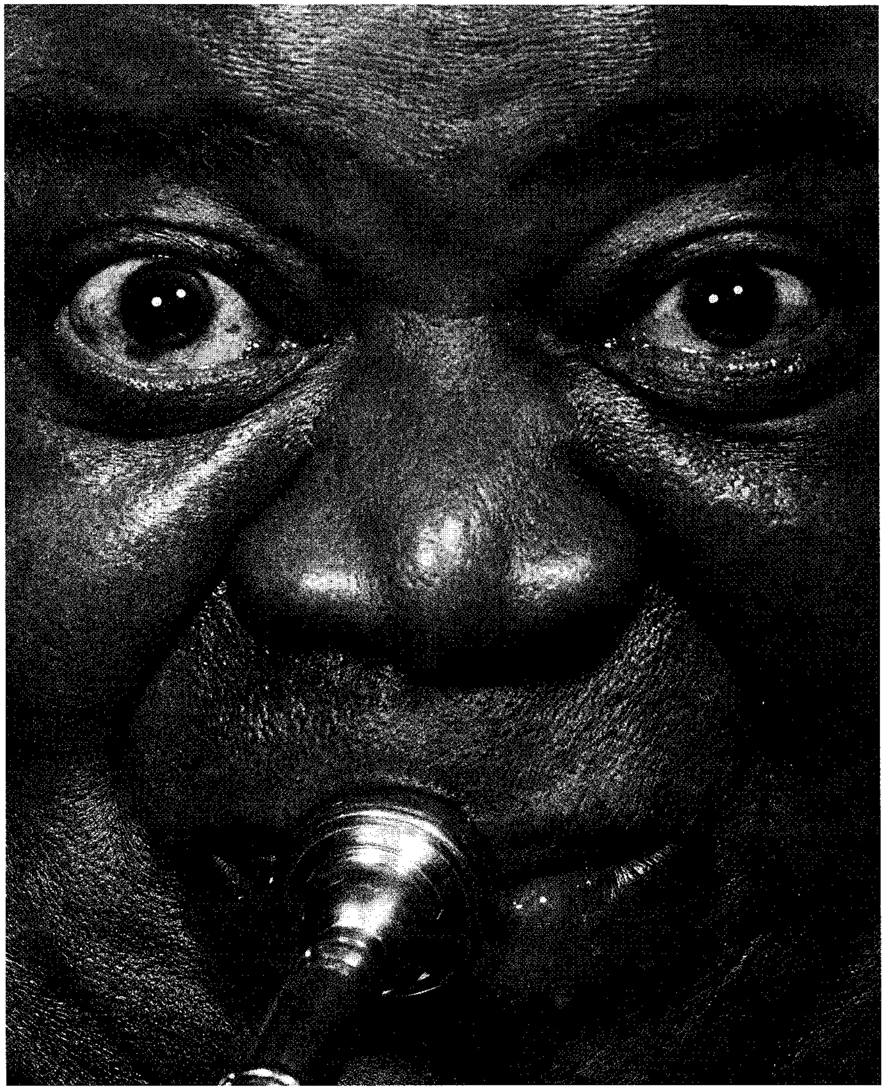
JAZZ

LOUIS, MILES, AND THE DUKE

Ken Burns brings a century of music to PBS.

BY WHITNEY BALLIETT



Louis Armstrong was the first great jazz soloist, and an enduring inspiration to other trumpet players. Photograph by Philippe Halsman.

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A conundrum: Only three per cent of the CDs sold last year were jazz recordings, yet an estimated fifty books on the subject were either published in 2000 or will be published next year. Perhaps all the critical reassessing, which has been gaining momentum in the past ten years, persuaded Ken Burns to make his newest and boldest docuthon, a nineteen-hour film called "Jazz," which will be shown in ten parts on PBS in January. He considers the film the completion of a cultural trilogy that began with "The Civil War" and continued with "Baseball." In the manner of his earlier epics, "Jazz" is both a history and a panorama of a unique improvisational American music that first surfaced in New Orleans around 1900 and is still producing gifted musicians.

The project wasn't easy. Not only has jazz developed with bewildering speed but it's kept changing names—New Orleans jazz, Chicago jazz, Dixieland, Kansas City jazz, swing, boogie-woogie, bebop, hard bop, cool jazz, the new thing, free jazz, and all the neos that have appeared in recent years. Burns has covered this chameleon subject in the only way possible, with an endless series of segments that move constantly back and forth in time. The film swarms with statistics. There are more than five hundred selections on the soundtrack (a lot of them snippets), and many underscore (or are blotted out by) fifty-seven talking heads. These include the trumpeter and C.E.O. of Jazz at Lincoln Center, Wynton Marsalis; the critics Gary Giddins, Nat Hentoff, and Stanley Crouch; the actor with the booming laugh, Ossie Davis; the *Times* cultural critic Margo Jefferson; Mercedes Ellington, the Duke's granddaughter; the sociologist and novelist Albert Murray; and such musicians and singers as Dave Brubeck, Arvell Shaw, Jon Hendricks, Artie Shaw, and Jimmy Rowles. A couple of dozen voices read Geoffrey Ward's straight-ahead script, and there is a host of advisers, among them Marsalis (Senior Creative Consultant), Crouch, and Murray—the so-called Holy Trinity, which governs Jazz at Lincoln Center and is clearly felt in "Jazz."

The film's chronology moves spasmodically. We get only to 1928 by the end of the third episode, and to 1939 by the end of the sixth. The seventh starts with Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, but they recede, and then take over much of the eighth, along with Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, and Dave Brubeck. The ninth program, going from the fifties into the sixties, introduces John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman, and suddenly the pace quickens. Sonny Rollins, Clifford Brown, Sarah Vaughan, Art Blakey, and Horace Silver flash by and Miles Davis returns and is followed by Coltrane and Coleman. The tenth and last episode gallops. There are glimpses of Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and Cecil Taylor, longer looks at Coltrane and Davis, and a montage of such newcomers as Joshua Redman, James Carter, Dianne Reeves, Nicholas Payton, Marsalis, and Gonzalo Rubalcaba. The series closes with quick farewell salutes to the ti-

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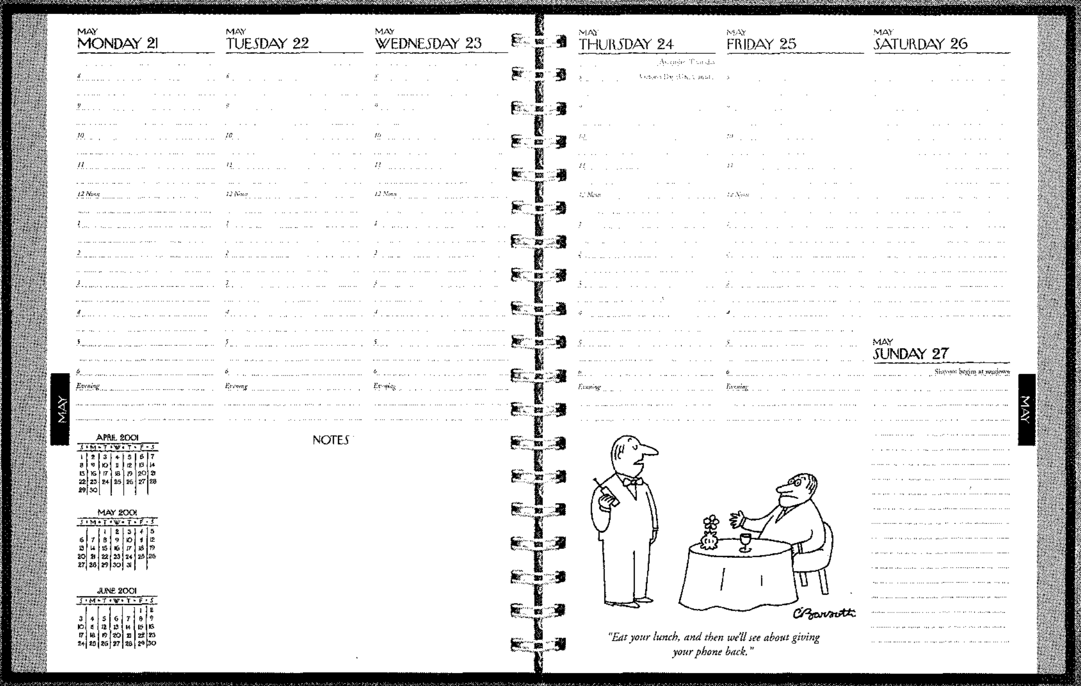

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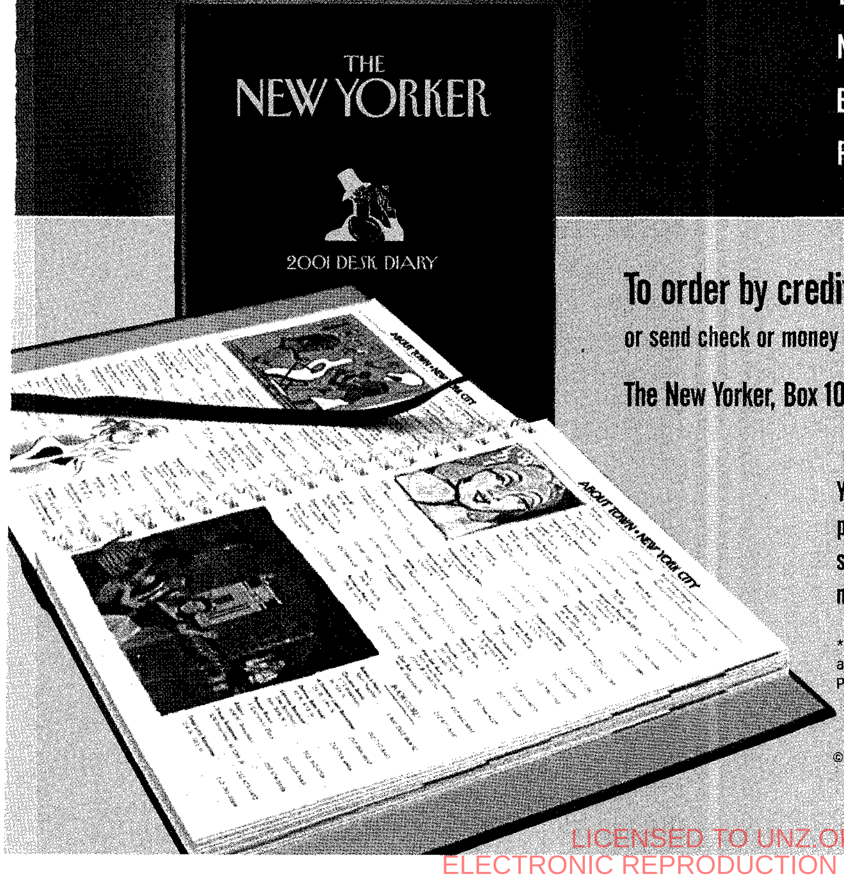

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tans—among them Louis Armstrong, Ellington, Count Basie, Monk, Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, and Ella Fitzgerald.

Audiences tend to listen to live music or music on film with their eyes, and that is what happens with "Jazz." In fact, Burns begs us to look at his huge film, and if we happen to absorb some of the music on the soundtrack so much the better. Burns was faced with a familiar problem before he started the project. Very little jazz was filmed before the thirties, so he was forced to use still photographs. He is, of course, a master at making photographs look live—moving his camera slowly into the picture for a closeup, scanning the picture from left to right or from bottom to top—and sometimes he cheats a little in, say, a crowd scene by adding murmuring crowd sounds in the background. These photographs are offset by the commentators (both Marsalis and Giddins appear scores of times) and by a great many not always correlative filler shots, made up of New Orleans street scenes, Mississippi riverboats, the Chicago lakefront, trains pounding across the country (musicians on the road), winding into stations, and creeping across high bridges at night. And we see New York City, from Harlem to the Battery, at every time of day and night and in every weather (some of the night shots are strikingly reminiscent of Georgia O'Keeffe's New York paintings), dancers in the Savoy ballroom (again and again), boxy cars driving cross-country on narrow pre-turnpike roads in the thirties, hoboes on a freight train and lines of jobless men during the Depression, and several sickening shots of lynchings, accompanied by Billie Holliday singing "Strange Fruit." (Burns returns frequently to the racial slights most black musicians endured, particularly while travelling in the South.)

Much of Burns's travelogue disappears when he starts using rare films of jazz in the thirties and forties. We get wonderful glimpses of Benny Goodman's famous 1938 Carnegie Hall concert; a concert Louis Armstrong gave in Copenhagen in 1933, his high notes ricocheting, his tempos blinding, and later, in the fifties, Armstrong doing a funny duet with Perry Como, on television, his teeth, voice, trumpet, and high-fives overpowering; the Chick Webb band at what appears to be the Savoy, with the tiny, amazing Webb high above his drums; Fats Waller at the piano, leering and mugging; Bessie Smith, standing at a bar and singing "St. Louis Blues" in Dudley Murphy's invaluable 1929 short; the Jimmie Lunceford band waving its instruments back and forth in unison; and the Glenn Miller band performing "I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo," with Tex Beneke and the Modernaires in creamy voice; and a couple of tantalizingly brief shots of Art Tatum.

It soon becomes clear that the heroes of "Jazz" are Armstrong, Ellington, Charlie Parker, Goodman, and Miles Davis. Armstrong and Ellington are, in effect, sainted. Armstrong is repeatedly called a genius, and Ellington the greatest American composer. Armstrong was the first great jazz soloist, but his most impassioned period lasted largely from 1928 to 1933. During that time, he made countless supreme recordings: the 1929 "Some of These Days," in which he goes down into his low register (where he spent little time during his career) and forever inspired the trumpeters Bunny Berigan and Ruby Braff; the soaring, almost operatic 1933 "Basin Street Blues"; and, of course, his extraordinary opening solo on the 1928 "West End Blues," an annunciatory improvisation unmatched in Western music. Overworked but incredibly conscientious, he spent much of the rest of his long career (he died in 1971) playing by rote. Then, suddenly, he'd knock you out again. This happened on two Columbia albums, "Louis Armstrong Plays W. C. Handy" (1954) and "Satch Plays Fats" (1955), and, two years later, on remakes for Decca of "King of the Zulus" and "Knockin' a Jug." Both match his most majestic work.

Ellington is treated in the same heroic, aerated way (Wynton Marsalis: "Duke Ellington knew how to take what could be and make it what is. He understood what it took to make something invisible visible"). It is, though, misleading to call him the greatest American composer. Elling-

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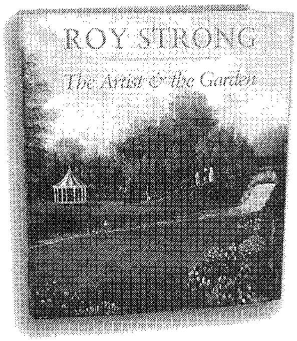

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ton was a miniaturist who created a new American music full of New Orleans echoes, jazz rhythms, handmade harmonies, and fresh instrumental combinations. He was, like Berlioz, an orchestral genius. Ellington's most startling years lasted from 1940 to 1942, when he put together almost forty unique three-minute concertos built around members of the band ("Jack the Bear," "Day Dream," and "Cotton Tail" are on the soundtrack, along with "Take the 'A' Train," Billy Strayhorn's most famous contribution to the Ellington œuvre). During the next thirty years, he assembled many "suites," some of them of great beauty and originality. He never lost his poise and humor and flair. Burns includes a couple of interviews with Ellington, who is in the same top, leg-pulling form that he was in during the early seventies, when the English critic Stanley Dance asked him if the blues is "a song of sorrow" and he replied, "No, it is a song of romantic failure."

The film's portraits of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis and Benny Goodman are surprisingly blunt. Parker's slyness and selfishness and addictions to drugs and alcohol are made plain. And so are Goodman's bullying and self-centeredness and Davis's arrogance and cruelty to women and fellow-musicians, and even his public. But the amount of space and energy and musical adulation that is given to these five musicians in "Jazz" tends to throw the project out of balance. Many first-rate musicians are tapped only in passing or are ignored altogether. Those who are mentioned briefly, then left on the cutting-room floor, include Charles Mingus, a great bassist and a wildly original composer and bandleader; the Modern Jazz Quartet, for forty years the most lyrical and swinging of jazz chamber groups; and the seminal pianists Earl Hines, Bud Powell, and Bill Evans, who, taken together, invented modern jazz piano.

The essential musicians who are ignored completely include Big Sid Catlett, the greatest jazz drummer (he does a twelve-bar solo in a funny 1947 black feature film, "Boy! What a Girl," that would have fitted beautifully into "Jazz"); Nat Cole, who helped bring Hank Jones and Tommy Flanagan into being (neither of them makes the cut, either); and Erroll Garner, a true and brilliant primitive who left his pianistic prints all over jazz. There are more: Pee Wee Russell, an endlessly original and lyrical clarinettist; the trombonists Vic Dickenson and Jimmy Knepper, utterly different but both inimitable and ceaselessly inventive; Jim Hall, Charlie Christian's successor; and the cornettist Bobby Hackett, whose one-chorus solo on Glenn Miller's "A String of Pearls" belongs with Armstrong's baroque edifice on "West End Blues." (Hackett worshipped Armstrong, who, in turn, considered Hackett his "main man.") But, as in all such choices, you can't get every wine right in a ten-course dinner.

The interviews are sometimes invaluable. Artie Shaw, his image Buddha-like, talks about playing the clarinet, the most difficult of all jazz instruments:

> Here's this clumsy series of keys on a piece of wood, and you're trying to manipulate them with the reed and the throat muscles and what they called an embouchure, and you're trying to make something happen that never happened before. You're trying to make a sound that no one ever got before, creating an emotion. You're trying to take . . . notes and make them come out in a way that moves you. If it moves you, it's going to move others. . . . Very rarely does it happen, and when it does you remember it for the rest of your life.

And here's the bassist Arvell Shaw, who worked with Louis Armstrong off and on from 1945 until Armstrong's death: "What he did, what he played, came from within. It came from his own heart—and from his mind. It wasn't anything contrived. It was him, it was Louis, what he was, the essence of his being. . . . He was a completely honest man musically and every other way that I knew about."

The soundtrack choices for the anointed in "Jazz" are sometimes puzzling. Louis Armstrong's 1931 "Stardust" is played five times, but we never hear his 1930 "Sweethearts on Parade," with its empyrean muted opening chorus, full of still tricky rhythmic jumps and pauses. We hear Artie Shaw's "Summertime" but not his "Stardust," which has a clarinet solo that he must still remember. We hear the tentative 1949 Miles Davis of "Venus de Milo"

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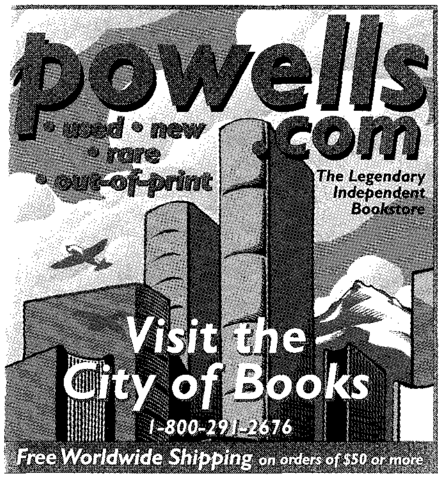
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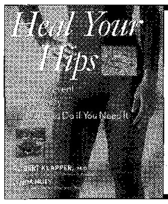

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and "Boplicity" but not the tight, assured 1954 Davis of "Walkin'," a muscular, ringing Davis and the antithesis of the weepy Davis of the late nineteen-fifties Gil Evans collaborations (heard here). Charlie Parker was a consummate blues player, but "Parker's Mood" is not on the soundtrack, and neither are his two classic choruses on the 1952 "Funky Blues."

I don't know if the Burns film will make people tap their feet, or make them feel as if they were watching a film about ancient Egypt. I don't know if it will make them flock to record stores to buy jazz CDs, or make them put on the Rolling Stones. But I do know that "Jazz" is a big, noisy panorama, and that panoramas rarely have room for lyrical secrets. Jazz is full of the lyricism that sustains our love of the music. Here are some: the way Sid Catlett picks up the trumpeter Sidney De Paris and sends him sailing down the last chorus of "After You've Gone" (1943); the soft, unearthly start of the tenor saxophonist Ike Quebec's solo on "Mad About You" (1944); the almost sotto-voce blue note Benny Goodman gets off in the third chorus of "Pick-a-Rib, Part II" (1938); Red Allen's leaning-back trumpet solo on Lionel Hampton's "I'm on My Way from You" (1939). All of these are old lyrical secrets, to be sure. But new ones keep turning up in the works of Bill Charlap and Leon Parker and Tom Harrell. And they turn up in Jean Bach's "A Great Day in Harlem," a peerless hour-long documentary about how Art Kane took a photograph for *Esquire* of fifty-seven jazz musicians gathered in front of a Harlem brownstone one day in the summer of 1958. The film also turns out to be a close look at how jazz musicians talk, move, play, and think. And, as such, it unwittingly prepared the way for Burns's "Jazz." ♦

From the Hazleton (Pa.) Standard-Speaker.

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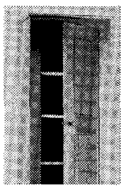

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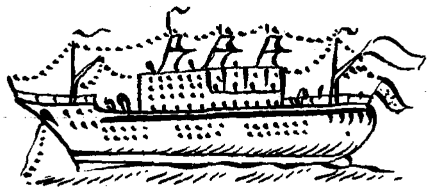
BRIEFLY NOTED

Pobby and Dingan, *by Ben Rice (Knopf; $16).* Ashmol Williamson, his younger sister Kellyanne, and her imaginary friends, Pobby and Dingan, have recently moved from England to Lightning Ridge, Australia, where everyone, including their luckless father, Rex, is obsessed with making a fortune mining opals. But their new world quickly turns bleak after Pobby and Dingan are "lost" at the opal mine, Rex is jailed for trying to steal opals from a neighbor's claim, and Kellyanne falls ill. Ashmol's efforts to save his sister's life give us a story that is startlingly strange, in the best sense, and Rice's pitch-perfect prose finally leads us, like Ashmol, "to believe in something which is hard to see."

The Journey Home, *by Olaf Olafsson (Pantheon; $24).* In Reykjavík during the Second World War, a woman commits an act for which she can never forgive herself: while her fiancé, a German Jew, is incarcerated in Buchenwald, she becomes involved with the troubled son of her rich employers. More than two decades later, she learns that she is terminally ill and returns home to reckon with the past. This unsettling novel asks, Can we absolve ourselves of our own crimes, real or imagined? Olafsson's controlled tone sometimes falls flat, but his understatement allows the tragedy to build until it speaks finally, and devastatingly, for itself.

A Good House, *by Bonnie Burnard (Holt; $25).* Early in this incandescent first novel—which spans fifty years in the life of a prospering, functional Canadian family—a dying mother gives each of her children a tag to carry into their future without her. Patrick is steady; Paul is funny and quick; and Daphne, whose injury from a freak childhood fall will subtly skew all their lives, has mystery, "to remind people if they are capable of being reminded that things are not necessarily what they seem." This book does the same for the reader.



Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men, *by Padgett Powell (Houghton Mifflin; $20).* An aging Southern wife who longs for the era of hatboxes sits down to make up a grocery list but instead launches into a flight of half-remembered facts and fanciful prose—much of it about the Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest and the mediocrity of life in the new South. Powell, in his haste to underscore his themes, sometimes misses the deepest emotional notes, but his "fugue about Forrest" is nevertheless a tour de force of wordplay and lucid description.

The Immaculate Deception, *by Iain Pears (Scribners; $25).* In this nimble mystery, set in Rome and Tuscany, the police investigator Flavia di Stefano is called in to find a painting that has been stolen by a radical performance artist; meanwhile, her husband, an art historian, is trying to track down the provenance of a beguiling little fifteenth-century Virgin that belongs to Flavia's former boss. Like those classic Nick and Nora whodunits, this book is really a comedy in disguise: the plot twists are finely turned, our heroes flirt harmlessly with danger, and in the end everyone gets what he may not have known he wanted all along.

Dream of the Walled City, *by Lisa Huang Fleischman (Pocket; $24.95).* This panoramic first novel breathes life into the apocryphal Chinese curse "May you live in interesting times." Jade Virtue, a spirited provincial schoolteacher, finds herself swept up in the turmoil following the abdication of the Emperor, in 1912: as her brother rises to power in Chiang Kai-shek's army, her best friend falls in with the young poet and revolutionary Mao Zedong. The historical backdrop recalls Dickens's "A Tale of Two Cities," but Fleischman also possesses a delicate restraint, attending to the rhythms of everyday Chinese life even as the ancient traditions are snuffed out, one by one.

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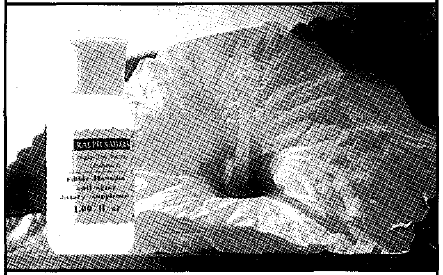

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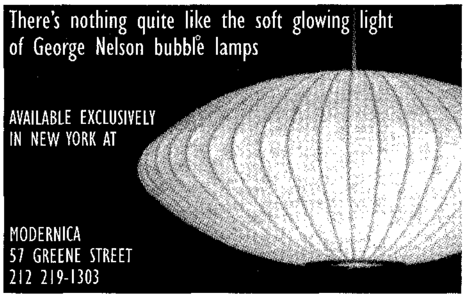

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THE THEATRE

DEEP POCKETS RUN SHALLOW

Two Christmas turkeys.

BY JOHN LAHR

Oh, what the hell—let's have another election. Hands up for voting Hollywood producers and other media vulgarians off our stages. Just take it as given that they're rich, boorish, ignorant, smug, that we envy them their wonder, their craven certainties, their guiltless power—and leave it at that. If all we can say about them is that they're philistines—which is apparent in how they live and behave—there's nothing to dramatize or reflect on. Go deep, or go home. Don't show us the money; show us the blood on their hands.

This thought came to me in the middle of the first act of "Old Money," Wendy Wasserstein's current exegesis on old and new money, at Lincoln Center's Mitzi Newhouse Theatre. The show is a kind of cash-flow analysis of the filthy rich, which follows the trail of gazillions of spondulicks as they play out over five generations of privilege. As one of Wasserstein's wealth-obsessed characters says, "Society has merged with celebrity. Cash, frankly, has superseded class. We live in an asset-based meritocracy." (Now you know.) Wasserstein presents her rampaging, foul-mouthed producer, Sid Nercessian (the vivacious Dan Butler), as Exhibit A. "My favorite fucking people in the world are artists," Nercessian says, upon arrival at a party in the restored Gilded Age mansion of Jeffrey Bernstein (Mark Harelik), a contemporary king of crazy money and a progressive mensch turned complacent mogul.

Wasserstein herself lives within shouting distance of the world of pure money, and she knows the topography of the rich the way Sacagawea knew the rivers west of St. Louis—she doesn't miss a single defining contour of that rarefied terrain. Her play is cluttered with the bric-a-brac of entitlement: feng-shui, Botox injections, social consultants, arbitrage, straw whaling purses, face-lifts, and suicide attempts. The rich learn the game of supremacy at an early age: how to decode the signs of status, how to separate the pretenders from the real thing, how to measure the distance between *them* and *us*. And Wasserstein is rightly amused—and amusing—about the distinctions between Trinity and Dalton, Baccarat and Tiffany, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, Julian Schnabel and Cindy Sherman. When Jeffrey Bernstein asks his preppy seventeen-year-old son Ovid—yeah, Ovid (the hardworking Charlie Hofheimer)—how he looks in his suit, the lad immediately demonstrates his talent for patrician social calculation. "It's nice," he says. "You've got that perfect 'I'm just a regular guy who paid five thousand bucks for this shirt' look."

In the aristocracy of success, there are no strangers, and we are meant to imagine that most of that aristocracy has congregated in the garden beyond the huge wrought-iron doors upstage—Puff Daddy, Henry Kissinger, Alan Greenspan, Charlie Rose, Henry Kravis, and Barry Diller are all evidently just outside our view. (The party, which takes place in New York, in August, marks both Bernstein's drawing power and the first anniversary of his wife's death.) The dialogue is studded with proper nouns, dropped like verbs into the conversation. "Honey, was it Henry James who wrote that Scorsese movie with Winona?" Nercessian asks his leggy Asian wife (Jodi Long), who runs a lingerie company called Bite Me. This kind of line must be as embarrassing to say as it is to hear. (Even a remembered high-society dancing-school instructor is given the perfect upper-class moniker: Frelinghuysen—of the St. Mark's and Princeton Frelinghuysens, one presumes.)

Wasserstein's name-dropping extends, also, to ideas. When one of the characters tells Bernstein that the rich owe it to society to enjoy their wealth, he replies, "So it's a sort of a Thorstein Veblen trickle-down theory." It's significant that Wasserstein gets the name right but the idea wrong. Veblen's droll thesis was that the rich fight with property, and that, far from being about enjoyment, their ostentatious display—a form of waste which he called "conspicuous consumption"—is a show of power, the predatory barbarian's proof of his superior survival skills.

"Old Money" fixes itself resolutely to the bloodless surface of the myth of wealth, dwelling not on the violence of the game of ownership but on its trophies. In this poorly constructed show—Wasserstein's characters are given only a wash of a past, and one is quickly confused as the play flashes back and forth in time—the rich do very little of anything except talk. Even then, their conversation adheres mostly to the restored mansion they're standing in; the century-old house itself has more history than its occupants. Its ghosts—the architect who built the house, the robber baron who paid for it, and the mogul who bought it from him—appear first to the robber baron's grandson, Tobias Vivian Pfeiffer III (John Cullum), a professor and former inhabitant of the mansion. Then, quite weirdly, they meet and converse across time with more or less everybody else at the party.

In fact, Thomas Lynch's sumptuous burnished sunroom, with its fine parquet floors, high chandeliered ceiling, and mahogany woodwork, speaks more articulately about the implications of money than the actors do. "Esteem is awarded only on evidence," Veblen said. And what the perfectly aligned crystal tumblers, the flawlessly arranged calla

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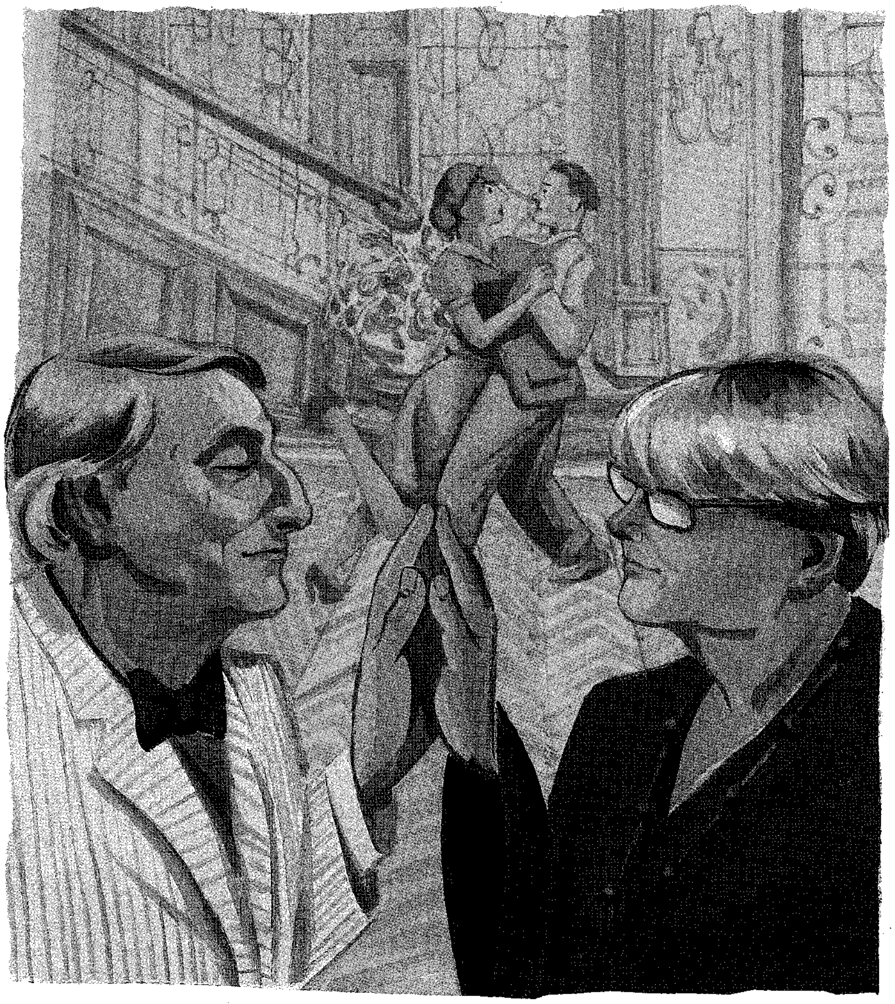
lilies and roses, the buffed floors, and the polished bannister bear witness to is the need of the filthy rich—whose greatest asset is the vigor of their greed—to forget their own ruthlessness. The sin of the getting is washed away in the calm spectacle of the spending: Lynch's elegant room is quite literally spotless.



Wendy Wasserstein's new play, "Old Money," dwells not on the ruthlessness and violence of the game of wealth but on its trophies.

ZOHAR LAZAR

The only real sign of life on the stage is Mary Beth Hurt, who manages to inject some fun into the proceedings and at least gives the audience the sense that she's happy to be there. She plays two characters: the bohemian sculptress Saulina Webb, Ovid's eccentric aunt, who is given to truth-telling and to occasional bitter outbursts about her declining star ("I can't bear to be judged anymore. I'm losing both the energy and the arrogance to pretend I don't care"); and the much more effervescent Edwardian free spirit Sally Webster, who delivers a period song and dance in lobster hat and claws, and whose sudden eruptions of energy—"Don't you find the twentieth century *thrilling*, Mr. Strauss!"—add, with their Elaine Stritch-like emphasis, a bit of oxygen to the evening.

Mark Brokaw has directed this lethargic play with a sluggishness that is all his own. He has allowed tone-deaf lines like "You don't seriously think I want to spend my entire life spinning the right buzz for parties and blow jobs" to stay in the script, and he lets actresses like Jodi Long and Kathryn Meisle—who plays the social-climbing social consultant who utters that line—get away with unconscionable flapping and mincing comments on the cartoon characters they think they're playing. I admire Lincoln Center's artistic director, André Bishop, for his loyalty to the authors he has cultivated—among them Tom Stoppard, John Guare, and Wasserstein herself. However, with producing as with parenting, leniency is not always the best policy.

"Butter-side-uppers" is what "Seussical"—which is less a musical than a Christmas pantomime disguised as a Broadway show—calls the privileged. Onstage, at the Richard Rodgers, the actors spray silly string at the audience; they shoot balls at the audience; they shed tears over the audience; they even get the audience to bid at an auction for Horton the Elephant. They do everything to the audience, in short, but actually reach it. The reason for this failure isn't hard to decipher. Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahren's music and lyrics are generic; the costumes, by William Ivey Long, are unimaginative; the choreography of Kathleen Marshall and the direction of Frank Galati—two usually superb professionals—are winded. In fact, exhaustion is exactly what the production broadcasts. For all the famous whimsy of Theodor Geisel's doggerel, "Seussical" is a show with curiously little charm.

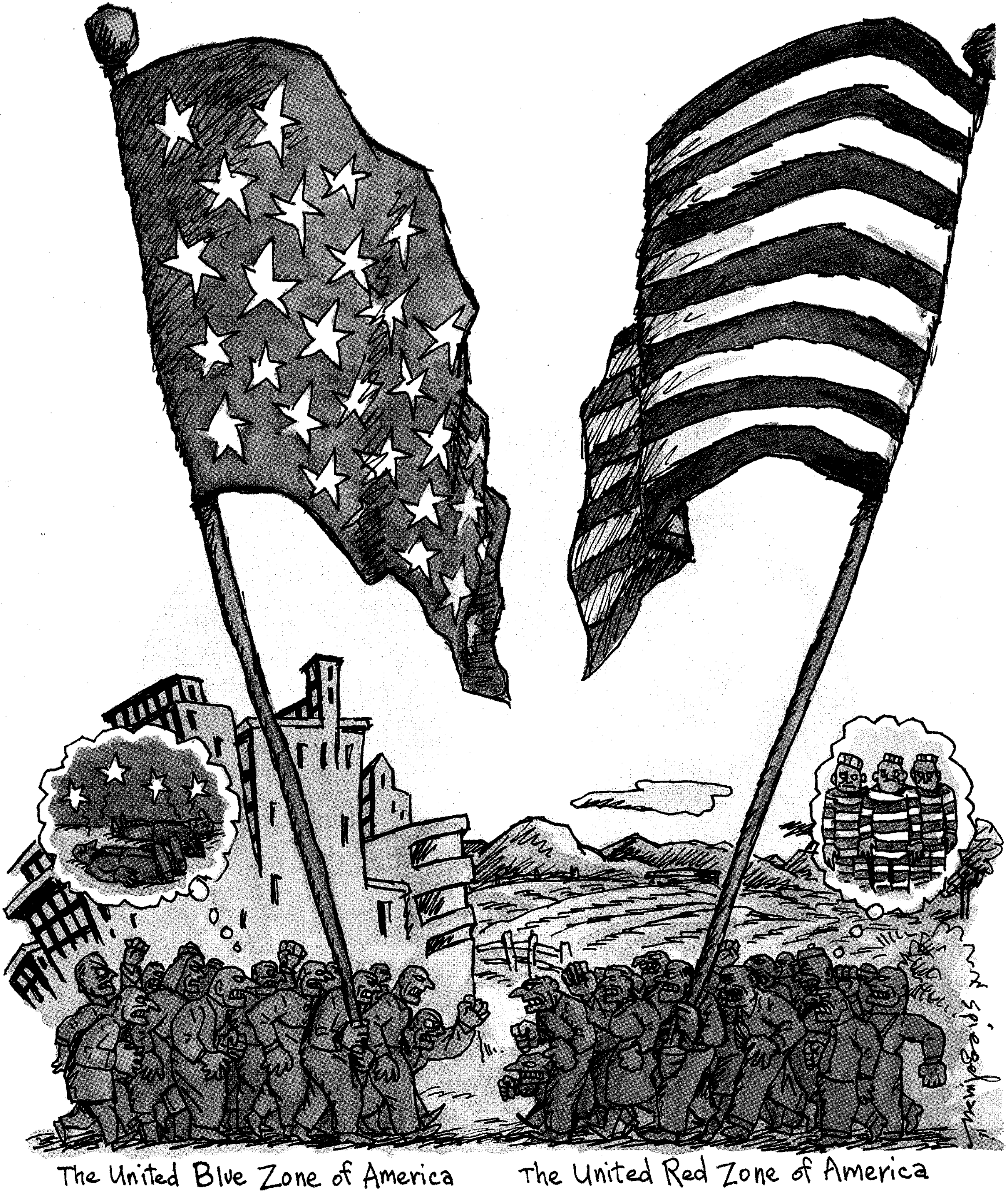
There is one winning and gentle performance—by Kevin Chamberlin as Horton the Elephant, who, you'll recall, gets conned into hatching an egg (which the producers clearly hoped would be a golden one). But the show's compère, the stolid David Shiner, who plays the Cat in the Hat, seems not to have an authentic antic bone in his gangly body. What's missing in this relentlessly cute, plot-heavy musical is mayhem and magic. "Oh, the things you can think!" are the first words of the first song of the show, in which, as far as I could make out, there is not one thought. No, I'm wrong. There are two or three: "Seussical" reminds you that "anything's possible," that you should "follow your hunch," and, especially and frequently, "how lucky you are":

> Think of life as a thrill
> And if worse comes to worse
> As we all know it will
> Thank your lucky star
> You've gotten this far. . . .
> How lucky you are.

At least "Seussical" got that right. Things could have been worse. I could have shelled out twenty dollars in the lobby for the Cat's official red-and-white stovepipe hat. ♦

THE BACK PAGE BY ART SPIEGELMAN

UNDER TWO FLAGS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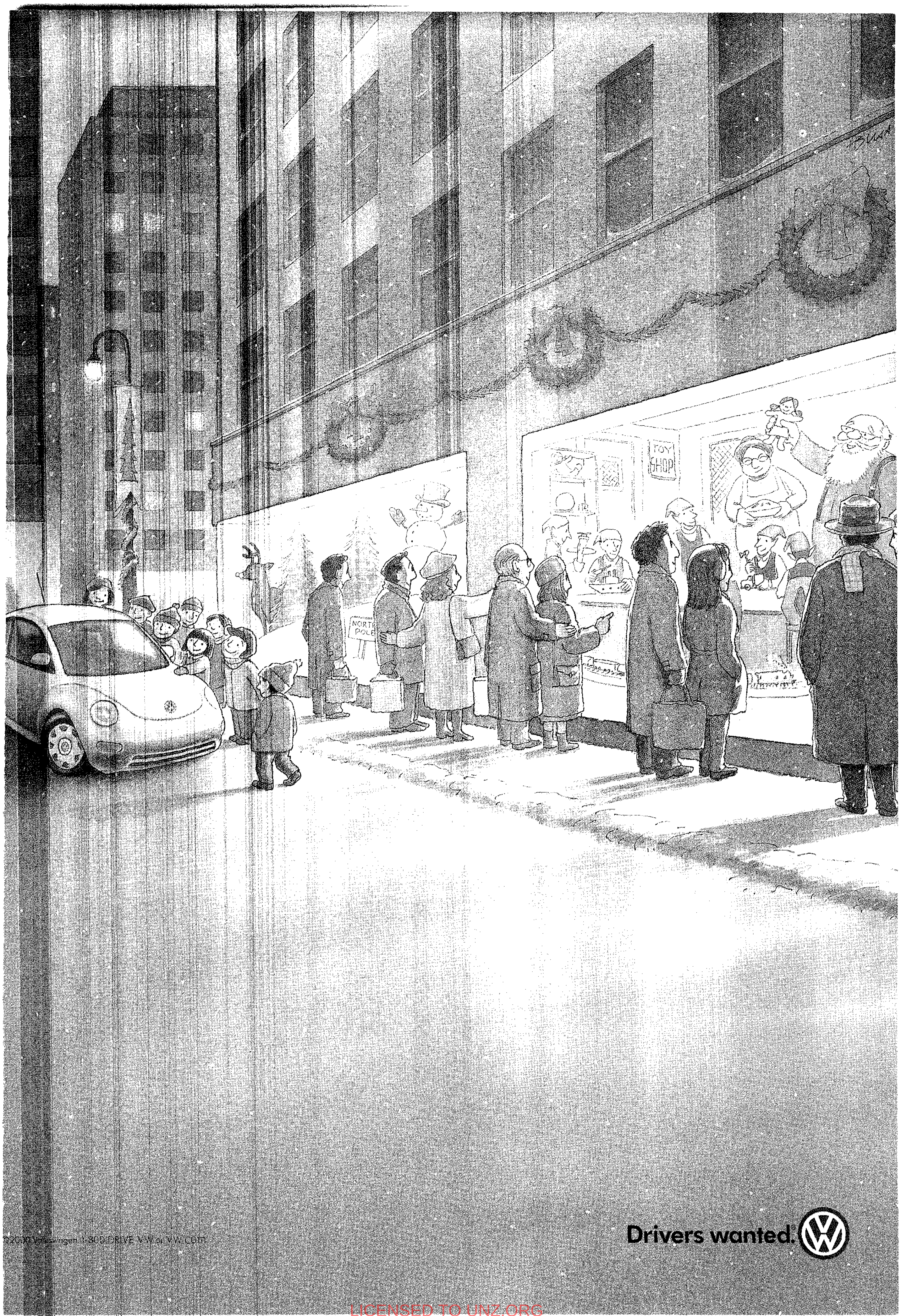
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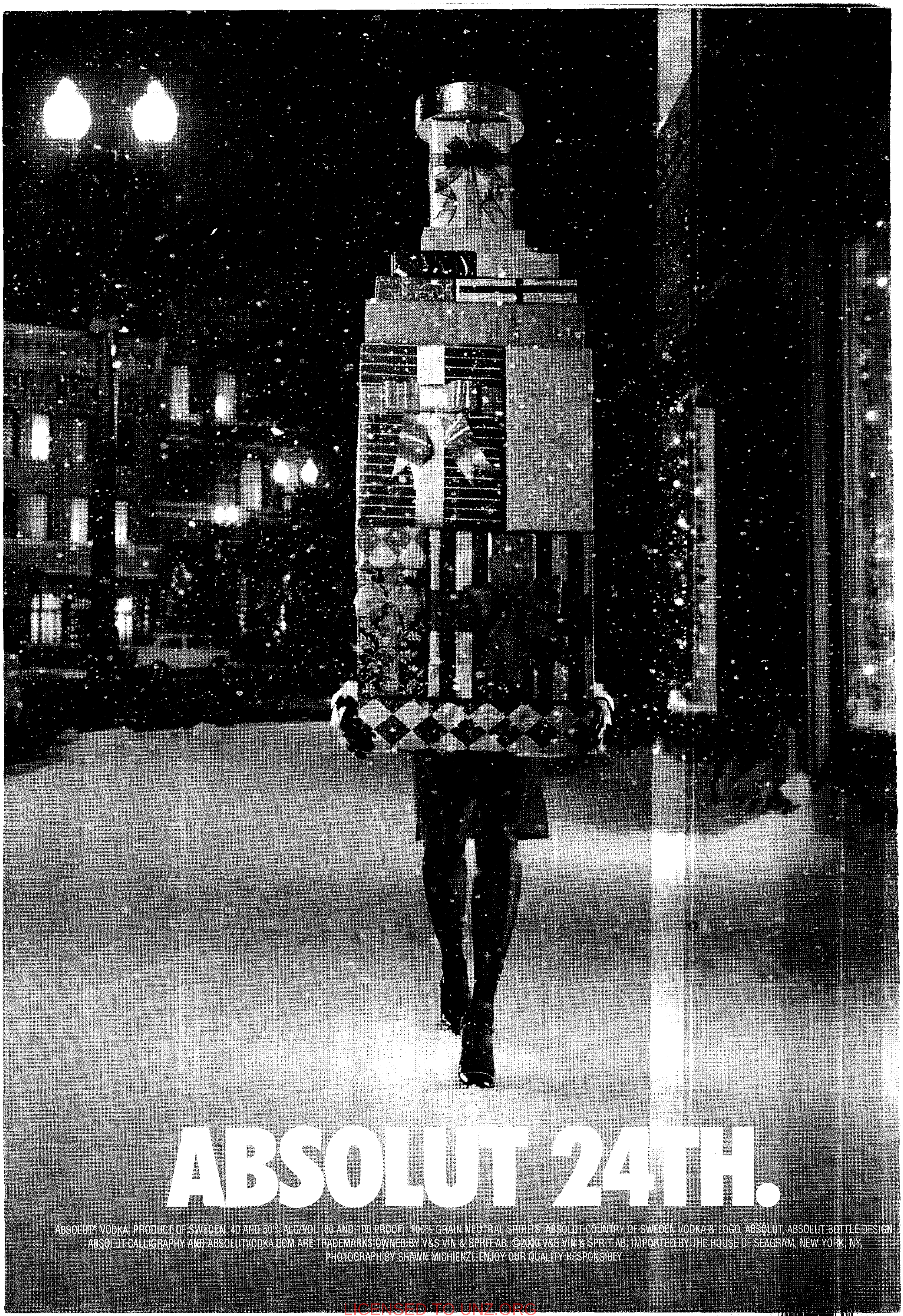
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